THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE LAND-LIVELIHOODS NEXUS IN AN ERA OF ECOLOGICAL CHANGE AND THE GLOBAL LAND RUSH

Access to land, land conflict and large-scale land acquisitions in Ethiopia

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DE POLITIEKE ECONOMIE VAN HET DWARSVERBAND TUSSEN GROND EN LEVENSONDERHOUD IN EEN TIJDPERK VAN ECOLOGISCHE VERANDERING EN EEN WERELDWIJDE RUN OP GROND

Toegang tot grond, grondconflict en grootschalige aankoop van grond in Ethiopië

Thesis

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To my mother ***Alemie Belachew***

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Acronyms

ADLI	Agricultural Development Led Industrialization
AfDB	African Development Bank
AILAA	Agricultural Investment Land Administration Agency
AISD	Agricultural Investment Support Directorate
ANRS	Amhara National Regional State
BGRS	Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State
BoEPLAU	Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use
BoFED	Benishangul-Gumuz Bureau of Finance and Economic Development
CSA	Central Statistical Agency
DA	Development Agent
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPS	Global Positioning System
GTP	Growth and Transformation Plan
HLPE	High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
MoARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MoFA	Ministry of Federal Affairs
MoFED	Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization

OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PA	Peasant Association
PASDEP	Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
SNNPR	Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

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Abstract

Across developing countries, rural areas have become increasingly vulnerable due to the combined effect of diverse factors, such as: land scarcity, environmental and climate change, population pressure, land acquisitions for industrial agriculture, and a rural economy that offers limited opportunities for alternative non-agricultural income generation. Although land remains the most fundamental resource in these areas, the politically contested nature of land, land access and land quality has become even more so in the contemporary era of ecological change and the global "land rush". With an example from rural Ethiopia, this thesis examines the contemporary political–economic dynamics of the land-livelihoods nexus in this changed context. This dissertation investigates the central research question: How and to what extent has the Ethiopian rural land-livelihoods nexus been politically contested and transformed in the contemporary era of ecological change and global land rush? Current understanding of rural livelihoods in the country places critical emphasis on access to land, as almost all rural households are largely dependent on farming as the basis for their livelihoods. Land rights, access to land, and land distribution have been fundamental issues in the country's political and agrarian history. This has gone through different trajectories over the last five to six decades, resulting in profound changes in state and class structures and tenure relations. Importantly, land-related issues have always engendered highly contentious political agendas in Ethiopia, where land tenure policies have been often controversial. However, the heated debates have so far mainly hinged on state versus private land tenure policy options, often captivated by the broader sense of exploring their economic viability for agrarian transformation and thus, hardly looking into the evolving complexity and local dynamics of access to land and conflicts over it. The state owns all land, but rural people have been guaranteed access to it through a land law that grants usufruct rights to anyone living in rural areas who aspires to engage in farming. However, despite this constitutional right, access to land has become increasingly difficult, particularly for the young generation, as land shortages

have already escalated in most parts of the country. The current pattern is one of landholdings comprised predominantly of small plots, which are often insufficient to earn a decent livelihood, and which may result in poverty traps. Consequently, there is an ongoing (re)interpretation of the current problems of access to land and small landholding patterns, which assumes that they constrain the process of agrarian change and differentiation in rural areas.

Based on twelve months of field research in the Amhara and the Benishangul-Gumuz regions, this thesis – informed by the study of agrarian political economy, complemented with political ecology and livelihoods perspectives – examines the land-livelihoods nexus in the context of two dramatic changes in objective conditions: (a) political-ecological changes in which the land-livelihoods nexus has been impacted in various ways. For instance, ecological degradation has been a serious challenge to agricultural productivity, directly affecting rural peoples' livelihoods. This problem has been, and is likely to be, further exacerbated by climate change, as this has been increasing the incidence of drought, crop failure, and loss of livestock, and accelerating deforestation and land degradation; and (b) the context of the global "land rush", in which Ethiopia is a hotspot, which puts further pressure on the land access by smallholders or landless in various regions of the country. The result of these two changes is that the already difficult situation of land control and dwindling land access among the rural poor has become even more difficult a challenge. These dynamics regarding the land-livelihood nexus and changes in the objective conditions within which this nexus exists, are generally more assumed than demonstrated. The political challenge of effecting democratic land access in this changed context and its generational dimension is proving to be central – albeit generally ignored, in the land and agrarian change studies in general, and global land rush debates in particular.

The thesis examines the evolving complexity and local dynamics of access to and conflict over land in selected rural areas of the Amhara region. Most recent research on land issues tends to focus on documenting the declining trends in landholding size, by demonstrating the amount of land held by individual households over time. As a result, the focus has moved away from investigating the means through which land is actually accessed under the prevailing context of land shortages, where the available landholdings are both intensively cultivated and often insufficient for household livelihood requirements due to continuing subdivisions. In this thesis, it is argued that focusing on the dynamics of this issue is crucial for understanding contemporary rural Ethiopia, particularly its predicaments to the youth. It looks at how the contemporary politics of land access shape and are shaped by social

factors, political economic structures and processes, and local ecological dynamics, and investigates the origins and the governance of land-related conflicts.

This thesis also examines the politics and implications of large-scale land acquisitions for indigenous local communities, with a particular focus on the Benishangul-Gumuz region. It looks at how local indigenous communities perceive ongoing large-scale land acquisitions, and how these communities have been reacting to them. A confluence of diverse global factors – such as volatile food prices, increased demand for biofuels and feeds, climate change and the financialization of commodity markets – have been important drivers of recent large-scale land acquisitions across many developing countries; in Ethiopia, however, this has primarily been driven by the state. This thesis argues that the land acquisitions pose threats to the economic, cultural, and ecological survival of local indigenous communities, who depend on customary forms of land access and control, and whose livelihoods are heavily based on access to natural resources. The study explores the relationship between federal and regional state elites' land authority and corporate elites, and how this intersects with the politics of subaltern villagers in the context of ongoing land acquisitions. The thesis argues that in the borderland region of Benishangul-Gumuz, the central state is concerned with the control of territory and people, and cannot effectively devolve authority to the regional state. The result is competing power over the control of land resources. It is thus very much an intra-elite dynamic. The complexities that occur, fuelled by politics of decentralisation, are played out in terms of contradictions in the land deal making, but are also reflected in land disputes and the loss of local livelihoods that result from the contestation of different sites of authority and resources. The thesis shows how the apparent silence of the indigenous communities regarding the land acquisitions is misleading. Specifically, it shows how indigenous local communities, although not organized either politically or economically, express their discontent in differentiated ways towards the state and social forces – particularly over land and access to employment, and around state politics.

As a whole, the thesis shows the evolving complexity and dynamics of land-livelihoods nexus in the face of ongoing ecological change and global land rush, a situation where the already difficult issues of politically contested land control and land access by the rural poor have become greater challenges. In so doing, the thesis attempts to improve our understanding of how the political challenges of effecting democratic land access in this changed context – especially for the younger generation – and protecting the territorial rights of ethnic minorities prove to be central.

De politieke economie van het dwarsverband tussen grond en levensonderhoud in een tijdperk van ecologische verandering en een wereldwijde run op grond: Toegang tot grond, grondconflict en grootschalige aankoop van grond in Ethiopië

Samenvatting

Plattelandsgebieden in ontwikkelingslanden worden steeds kwetsbaarder door een combinatie van verschillende factoren waaronder: grondschaarste, milieu- en klimaatverandering, bevolkingsdruk, grondaankopen voor industriële landbouw en een plattelandseconomie die beperkte mogelijkheden biedt voor alternatieve bronnen van inkomsten buiten de landbouw. Hoewel grond nog steeds het belangrijkste bestaansmiddel is in deze gebieden, ontstaat er steeds meer politieke strijd rondom grond, toegang tot grond en kwaliteit van de grond in het huidige tijdperk van ecologische verandering en de wereldwijde 'run op grond'. Op basis van een voorbeeld uit het platteland van Ethiopië wordt in dit proefschrift de hedendaagse politiek-economische dynamiek van het dwarsverband tussen grond en levensonderhoud in deze veranderde context onderzocht. De centrale onderzoeksvraag is: op welke manier en in welke mate is het dwarsverband tussen grond en levensonderhoud op het platteland in Ethiopië politiek omstreden en getransformeerd in het huidige tijdperk van ecologische verandering en de wereldwijde run op grond? Op dit moment wordt toegang tot grond gezien als belangrijkste bron van levensonderhoud / middelen van bestaan op het platteland, omdat bijna alle plattelandshuishoudens voornamelijk afhankelijk zijn van landbouw voor hun levensonderhoud. Recht op grond, toegang tot grond en verdeling van grond zijn altijd zeer belangrijke kwesties geweest in de politieke en agrarische geschiedenis van het land. De trajecten die op dit gebied de laatste vijf à zes decennia zijn doorlopen hebben geresulteerd in diepgaande veranderingen in staats- en klassenstructuren en pachtverhoudingen. Van belang is dat grondgerelateerde kwesties altijd zorgen voor zeer controversiële politieke agenda's in Ethiopië, waar beleid op het gebied van grondeigendom vaak omstreden is. De verhitte debatten gaan tot dusver echter voornamelijk om beleidsopties

voor publiek of privaat grondbezit, vaak in de bredere zin van het verkennen van de economische haalbaarheid van een agrarische transformatie en daarmee grotendeels voorbijgaand aan de bijbehorende complexiteit en lokale dynamiek van toegang tot grond en conflicten daarover. Alle grond is staatseigendom, maar plattelandsbewoners hebben de garantie op toegang tot grond volgens een wet op het grondbezit die vruchtgebruikrechten toekent aan iedereen die op het platteland woont en landbouw wil bedrijven. Ondanks dit grondwettelijke recht is het echter steeds moeilijker geworden om toegang tot grond te krijgen, vooral voor de jongere generatie, omdat er in grote delen van het land al een ernstig tekort aan grond is. Op dit moment is de meeste grond verdeeld in perceeltjes die vaak te klein zijn om in het levensonderhoud te kunnen voorzien, wat kan leiden tot armoedevallen. Hierdoor is er momenteel sprake van een (her)interpretatie van de huidige problemen van toegang tot grond en het patroon van kleine percelen. Daarbij wordt aangenomen dat deze problemen het proces van agrarische verandering en differentiatie in plattelandsgebieden belemmeren.

Dit proefschrift is gebaseerd op twaalf maanden veldonderzoek in de regio's Amhara en Benishangul-Gumuz en inzichten uit de agrarische politieke economie aangevuld met politiek-ecologische en levensonderhoudperspectieven. Het onderzoek gaat over het dwarsverband tussen grond en levensonderhoud binnen de context van twee ingrijpende veranderingen in objectieve omstandigheden:

(a) Politiek-ecologische veranderingen die het dwarsverband tussen grond en levensonderhoud op verschillende manieren beïnvloeden. Aantasting van het milieu vormt bijvoorbeeld een serieuze uitdaging voor landbouwproductiviteit en is rechtstreeks van invloed op de middelen van bestaan van plattelandsbewoners. Dit probleem wordt verder verergerd door klimaatverandering omdat droogte, misoogsten en veesterfte hierdoor vaker voorkomen en ontbossing en bodemaantasting versneld optreden; een trend die waarschijnlijk doorzet.

(b) De context van de wereldwijde 'run op grond', met Ethiopië als hotspot, die het voor kleine boeren of landlozen in verschillende regio's van het land nog moeilijker maakt om toegang tot grond te krijgen.

Deze twee veranderingen hebben tot gevolg dat de nu al moeilijke situatie van grondbeheer en van arme plattelandsbewoners met steeds minder toegang tot grond een nog grotere uitdaging wordt. Deze dynamiek van het dwarsverband tussen grond en levensonderhoud en de veranderingen in de objectieve omstandigheden eromheen is een aanname en moet nog worden aangetoond. De politieke uitdaging om democratische toegang tot grond te

realiseren in deze veranderde context met zijn generatiedimensie blijkt een centrale – doch meestal genegeerde – factor te zijn in het onderzoek naar grond en agrarische verandering in het algemeen, en in wereldwijde debatten over de run op grond in het bijzonder.

Dit proefschrift behandelt de zich geleidelijk ontwikkelende complexiteit en lokale dynamiek van toegang tot en conflict over grond in geselecteerde plattelandsgebieden in de regio Amhara. Het meeste recente onderzoek naar grondkwesties documenteert de afname in de grootte van boerenbedrijven door de hoeveelheid grond waarover individuele huishoudens door de tijd heen beschikken te laten zien. Hierdoor ligt de focus niet meer op de manier om daadwerkelijk toegang tot grond te krijgen binnen de bestaande context van een tekort aan grond, waarbij de beschikbare stukken landbouwgrond niet alleen intensief bewerkt worden, maar vaak ook te klein zijn om in het levensonderhoud van het huishouden te kunnen voorzien vanwege voortdurende onderverdeling. In dit proefschrift wordt betoogd dat onderzoek naar de dynamiek van deze kwestie essentieel is om het platteland van Ethiopië te begrijpen, en met name de moeilijke situatie van de jeugd. Dit proefschrift beschrijft hoe de hedendaagse politiek van toegang tot grond vormgeeft aan en wordt vormgegeven door sociale factoren, politiek-economische structuren en processen en lokale ecologische dynamiek, en gaat in op de oorsprong en de bestuurlijke benadering van conflicten over grond.

Dit onderzoek is ook gericht op de politiek van grootschalige grondaankopen en de implicaties hiervan voor inheemse lokale gemeenschappen, in het bijzonder in de regio Benishangul-Gumuz. Er is onderzocht hoe inheemse lokale gemeenschappen aankijken tegen aanhoudende grootschalige grondaankopen en hoe deze gemeenschappen daarop reageren. Een samengaan van verschillende factoren op wereldschaal, waaronder onstabiele voedselprijzen, toegenomen vraag naar biobrandstoffen en -voeding, klimaatverandering en de financialisering van grondstoffenmarkten, was een belangrijke aanjager voor recente grootschalige grondaankopen in veel ontwikkelingslanden; in Ethiopië is het echter hoofdzakelijk de staat die hierachter zit. In dit proefschrift wordt betoogd dat de grondaankopen een bedreiging vormen voor het economisch, cultureel en ecologisch voortbestaan van inheemse lokale gemeenschappen die afhankelijk zijn van traditionele vormen van toegang tot en beschikking over grond, en die toegang tot natuurlijke hulpbronnen nodig hebben voor hun levensonderhoud.

In het onderzoek wordt gekeken naar de relatie tussen de federale en regionale overheid en private partijen wat betreft de zeggenschap over grond, en naar de opstelling van ondergeschikte dorpelingen die geconfronteerd

worden met voortdurende grondaankopen. In dit proefschrift wordt betoogd dat de centrale overheid in het grensgebied van Benishangul-Gumuz de zeggenschap over het grondgebied en de bevolking niet effectief kan overdragen aan de regionale overheid. Dit leidt tot een machtsstrijd over de zeggenschap over grond en deze dynamiek speelt zich dus binnen de elites af. De ingewikkelde situatie die hierdoor ontstaat, wordt versterkt door een politiek van decentralisatie en leidt tot tegenstijdigheden in het maken van afspraken over grondaankopen, maar is ook terug te zien in grondconflicten en het verlies van lokale middelen van bestaan die het gevolg zijn van de onenigheid over welke instantie de zeggenschap heeft over hulpbronnen. Uit dit onderzoek blijkt dat het schijnbare stilzwijgen van de inheemse gemeenschappen over de grondaankopen misleidend is. De resultaten laten zien dat lokale gemeenschappen, ook al hebben ze zich niet politiek of economisch georganiseerd, op gedifferentieerde wijze uiting geven aan hun onvrede ten opzichte van de overheid en sociale krachten – vooral als het gaat om grond en werkgelegenheid en om overheidsbeleid.

Het proefschrift als geheel toont de complexiteit en dynamiek van het dwarsverband tussen grond en levensonderhoud ten tijde van voortdurende ecologische verandering en een wereldwijde run op grond, een situatie waarin de moeilijke kwesties van politieke strijd om zeggenschap over grond en toegang tot grond voor arme plattelandsbewoners nog grotere uitdagingen zijn geworden. Op deze wijze wordt geprobeerd duidelijk te maken dat in deze veranderde context de politieke uitdagingen van het bewerkstelligen van democratische toegang tot grond – vooral voor de jongere generatie – en het beschermen van de territoriale rechten van etnische minderheden het belangrijkst zijn.

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In sub-Saharan Africa, livelihood insecurity has been persistent throughout the continent owing to a variety of interrelated economic, social and political factors and environmental crises. A livelihood refers to "the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living" (Carney 1998: 2). Although there is considerable variation in the level of poverty across them, sub-Saharan African countries face the highest incidence of rural poverty in the world (IFAD 2010: 16). Over the past two decades, there has been a trend of rising vulnerability in rural areas of the region; various factors have been mentioned that might explain this phenomenon, including: economic growth downturns, adverse trends in access to natural resources, environmental deterioration, climate change, HIV/AIDS pandemic, conflict, trade disadvantages, and the adverse effects of globalization (Ellis 2006: 387, Baro and Deubel 2006).

Most rural households in sub-Saharan Africa depend on agriculture as the main source of their livelihoods and hence rely on the productive use of land. In the contemporary era of ecological change and global "land rush", the politically contested nature of land control and land access among rural dwellers has become even more difficult a challenge across many developing countries. However, livelihood sources have now become diverse across and within countries in which households engage in farming, agricultural wage labour, employment in rural non-farm economy and migration (Bryceson 2002a, 2000a). Chambers (1997) argued that poor people have to diversify their livelihood sources against risks and uncertainties. However, despite an increasing diversification of livelihood sources, agriculture continues to play a vital role for poor people through

its contribution to growth, employment and livelihoods in most sub-Saharan African countries.

Despite progress witnessed in reducing poverty in several parts of the world over the past couple of decades, dealing with persistent rural poverty has continued to be central to the economic development agenda of sub-Saharan Africa (IFAD 2010). Given the dependence of most rural households on natural resources for their livelihood in many of these countries,[1] coupled with pervasive adverse trends in environmental and climatic conditions, vulnerability levels are said to have been rising throughout rural areas (Ellis 2006, UNDP 2014). The picture is highly diversified and, without a critical understanding of the dynamics and underlying causes of persistent vulnerabilities of rural livelihoods, attempts to address rural poverty and identify effective solutions to it are likely to be unsuccessful.

Many scholars have noted an increased de-linking of rural people's livelihoods away from being directly dependent on natural resources, and towards diverse livelihood sources, which include multiple types of assets, income generation, and product and labor markets (Bebbington 1999: 2022, Zoomers 2001: 13, Rigg 2006). Hence, rural livelihoods are generally no longer be viewed as being directly and largely tied to agriculture and access to land. Moreover, the solution to rural poverty should not solely be associated with the invigoration of agriculture and the redistribution of land. Instead, it should be viewed in light of a wider conception of access to a range of resources that rural people require to make a living. Nonetheless, land as the basis for sustainable livelihoods has been underscored even in those places where access to land is necessarily not viewed as the best avenue for raising rural incomes. This has been explicitly argued in many studies conducted in developing and transition economies (e.g., Akram-Lodhi et al. 2007, Spoor 2009) that provide several accounts of the relationship between lack of access to land and rural poverty. It is argued here that access to land is still critical to the people living (and producing) in rural areas, who partly or largely depend on crop farming, livestock and the use of forest resources for their livelihoods. In such a context, rural poverty can then be conceptualized as being closely related to access and control over land. Being critically important to rural livelihoods, inequalities in access to and distribution and productivity of land are among the key factors impeding rural growth and ensuring food security. In fact, land is much more than an economic resource, having a broader significance;

this is particularly true for peasants for whom land signifies a way of life and also holds cultural significance.[2] It is also an important political resource that establishes power relations between and among individuals, households, communities, and the state (Borras and Franco 2010b: 3, Lund and Boone 2013).

In the context of rural Ethiopia, most livelihoods are fundamentally grounded in the agricultural sector. It can be argued that poverty has its roots in the notion of access to resources (especially the distribution and productivity of land) and vulnerability of livelihoods to shocks (especially drought). Therefore, the production and reproduction of rural poverty in the country cannot be de-linked from land or other agricultural resources.

With regard to persistent vulnerabilities of households to livelihood insecurity, rural Ethiopia could be cited as a clear example. Ethiopia remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with a human development index ranking 173 out of 187 reported countries (UNDP 2014). With US$ 470, the country's per capita income is much lower than the sub-Saharan Africa average of US$ 1,624 (World Bank 2014b).[3]

Although there has been significant progress in key human development indicators over the last two decades (World Bank 2014a), poverty remains widespread, with 29.6% of the population living below the national poverty line (UNDP 2014). The level of poverty is found to be higher in rural areas where the overwhelming majority of the population resides (MoFED 2008). Most of the rural households in the country have small landholdings, in which more than half (57%) currently cultivate less than one hectare, while the average household size is about five members (CSA 2012, CSA and World Bank 2013).

As is true for most sub-Saharan Africa countries, the country is still far from transforming its economy, as the majority of its population continues to live in rural areas, and agriculture remains the major source of employment. The sector accounts for about 42.7% of GDP, roughly 70% of export earnings, and about 80% of employment in 2012/13 (OECD, AfDB and UNDP 2014: 3). The paradox is that, although the vast majority of the population is engaged in the agricultural sector, food insecurity is still a persistent problem.[4] Ironically, those rural people who are themselves specialized in the production of food are among the most vulnerable to food insecurity, and unable to produce enough to feed themselves all year round.

The growth of the agricultural sector greatly determines the economic growth of the country (UNDP 2006). However, the sector is dominated by subsistence rain-fed farming systems and trapped by numerous challenges. These challenges include: shrinking farm sizes, high farmland fragmentation, high population pressure, land tenure insecurity, farmland scarcity, erratic rainfall, environmental degradation, low farm income and productivity (Nega et al. 2003, Tolossa 2005a, Gebreselassie 2006, Rahmato 2008, 2009a). These issues have been assumed to constrain the process of agrarian change and differentiation in rural areas. Although land remains at the center of rural livelihoods, these problems have particularly resulted in declining levels of access to this key resource by the poor, thereby affecting food security and livelihoods of most households in many rural areas. It is also plausible to relate declining access to land resources among the rural poor to increasing access to the same resource by other actors including the state, state-owned enterprises or private corporate actors. In a new era of global land rush and climate change, the challenges of poor rural people are likely to intensify further. Many studies in rural Ethiopia (e.g., Carswell 2002, Devereux et al. 2003, Tolossa 2005a) indicate important changes in the composition and sources of rural incomes propelled by these factors. As a result of deteriorating opportunities in rural areas, households often engage in many diversified activities including seasonal migration. McDowell and de Haan (1997), for instance, point out that migration is widespread as a component of livelihood diversifications in the country. Seasonal labour migration to other places such as urban areas and large-scale commercial farms provide opportunities to households in supplementing their incomes, smoothing consumption and protecting their asset bases during lean seasons (World Bank 2007: 80). Given the contribution of seasonal migration to rural livelihoods – and hence its importance for the wider rural change – McDowell and de Haan (1997) underscore the need to consider migration issues together with other livelihood strategies.

The roots of rural poverty in the country lie mainly in the agricultural sector, where land is the critical resource (Rahmato 2009a, Gebreselassie 2006, Nega et al. 2003, wa Githinji and Mersha 2007). Not just access to productive land, but also a number of other factors – such as historical, environmental, economic, and institutional ones – as well as social and political relations among individuals and groups in society account for the deeply entrenched rural poverty in the country. It is equally important that

the persistence of rural poverty could also be related to the lack of dynamism in the broader economy such as the inability of a strong non-agricultural sector to emerge or lack of strong urban development to reverse declining farm size and take the pressure off over degraded land resources (Ellis 2006). Generally, rural livelihoods throughout the country are evolving in response to changing opportunities and challenges and, hence, cannot be conceptualized by simple considerations. The rural population is increasing and environmental conditions are changing. The result is that arable lands and other land-based resources are shrinking, and many of those that remain are overexploited or degraded. In other cases, local indigenous communities have seen their access to land, water or forest resources being threatened and reduced due to the acquisition of those resources by other actors – acquisitions that may have been promoted by state policies. Generally, access to land and thus, rural livelihoods have come under increased pressure in many parts of the country. This thesis aims to understand and untangle these complexities and dynamics of livelihoods, through a critical examination of how land is accessed, utilized, contested and (re) defined in the context of overall land scarcity and rising rural vulnerabilities.

The already difficult condition of land access has become even more so with the advent of large-scale land acquisitions or land rush. This study engages with the recent phenomenon of large-scale land acquisitions taking place in the country. The issue of land has gained particular momentum over the past few years, due to the ongoing enclosures by a wide-range of actors (such as the state, state-owned enterprises and private investors). There has been a growing and renewed global interest in land resources related to expanding food demand, high food prices, the growing demand for biofuels and animal feeds, climate change, the expansion of trade regimes, and the emergence of consumer- and corporate-driven food systems (Borras et al. 2011, Borras and Franco 2012, HLPE 2011, Toulmin 2008, Visser and Spoor 2011, White and Dasgupta 2010, Zoomers 2010, McMichael 2010, De Schutter 2011, Akram-Lodhi 2012). Analytically, the contemporary large-scale land acquisitions must be situated within the development of capitalism and capital accumulation (Akram-Lodhi 2012, Levien 2012, White et al. 2012). This growing interest in land resources, both domestic and transnational, has elevated pressures on their availability. Those most threatened are poor rural people who, in fact, need land the most; this includes, among others, ethnic minorities, indigenous

people, pastoralists and peasants (Borras and Franco 2012). In Ethiopia, such large-scale land acquisitions, both by domestic and foreign investors, have been taking place over the last few years, mainly in the lowland regions of the country. While estimates vary, a 2011 World Bank report indicates that the total amount of land acquired by investors in Ethiopia between 2004 and 2008 amounts to 1.2 million hectares (Deininger and Byerlee 2011), while the Oakland Institute estimates that the land transferred to investors, as of January 2011, reaches more than 3.6 million hectares (Oakland Institute 2011: 18, see also Rahmato 2011: 37). Although new opportunities could be created from increases in land investments for national growth broadly, central and critical questions are raised regarding the land rights of poor local communities and their implications for local livelihoods in addition to the questions whether and to what extent the promised employment creation and infrastructural development in land deals are in fact true. In this thesis, by using an agrarian political economy/ecology approach, these wider agrarian and rural development issues are examined through particular case studies in selected *woredas* within two different regions of the country, namely the Amhara and the Benishangul-Gumuz regional states.[5] The thesis particularly concentrates on two issues: first, the dynamics of access to land, land conflicts and livelihoods in the Amhara region; second, the politics and implications of recent large-scale land acquisitions for local livelihoods in the Benishangul-Gumuz region. This second issue will be addressed by focusing on how local indigenous communities, with a particular emphasis on the Gumuz people, perceive the ongoing land acquisitions and have been reacting to them.

The rest of the chapter presents the research problem, objectives and questions, as well as relevance of the study, followed by a discussion of the analytical framework. The final section provides the outline of the thesis.

1.2 The problematique

In the context of my study regions – as is the case for any other rural area of the country – the current understanding of livelihoods emphasizes the issue of access to land, as almost all rural households are largely dependent on farming as the basis for their livelihoods. Issues related to land rights, access to land and land distribution have always been fundamental in the political and agrarian history of the country. Particularly over the last six decades, the country's history has gone through different trajectories that

have resulted in profound changes in the state, class structures, and tenure relations (Rahmato 2009). Before the 1974 revolution that deposed the feudal monarchy, the land tenure system was characterized by landlordism in which access to land by peasants was a difficult and complex issue, an era in which the subordination of the peasantry to the landed classes was immense (Cohen and Weintraub 1975, Markakis 1974, Rahmato 1984, Tareke 1991).[6] The revolution was a landmark in the country's history by bringing radical agrarian reforms and abolishing the old feudal system and its exploitative systems of property relations in rural areas. In the following years, land belonging to landlords was expropriated and all land was declared state property (Rahmato 1984, 2009, Mengisteab 1990).

Under the Derg regime, land was distributed among peasants on use-right (usufruct) basis. This reform was carried out by Peasant Associations (PAs), whose formation and consolidation were ensured by the land reform proclamation of 1975. They were entrusted to implement land redistribution, to organize cooperatives, and to serve as local government administrations (Rahmato 1984, Mengisteab 1990).[7] During this reform, each farming household was assured access to a certain amount of land. Consequently, the allocation of land to each household was done not only through an initial distribution after the revolution but also through following periodic land redistribution and reallocations. These redistributions aimed to address the demands of new claimants and to promote holding equity. While this led some to argue that it minimized landlessness, the practice was generally thought to have brought about the size reduction and fragmentation of landholdings, as well as contribute to tenure insecurity (Rahmato 1984, 2009, Alemu 1999, Admassie 2000). After the overthrow of the Derg regime in 1991, the following (and current) government maintained the land policy that made all land the property of the state. Nevertheless, it introduced a number of changes, including short-term land transfers (such as limited leases and rentals), and long-term transfers through inheritance (Rahmato 2009). Moreover, the country's 1995 constitution allows regional governments to formulate their regional land laws, which take their particular contexts into account.

The last major land redistribution in the Amhara region, which is one of the focal regions for this study, was undertaken in 1997 (Ege 1997); no further redistributions were implemented thereafter. Currently, the regional land policy formally prohibits further land redistributions in any

part of the region even though it stipulates the possible future redistribution of irrigable lands (ANRS 2006). It is therefore likely that those under 18 years of age during the time of the last land redistribution become landless or face increasing difficulties in gaining access to land when reaching adulthood and trying to establish their own households and farms. Unsurprisingly, the alternatives open to those who demand access to land seem to be very limited given the overall situation of land scarcity and progressive dwindling of landholding size across the region, which is the result of the constant division and sub-division of holdings. Currently, the plight of rural people (especially young, unmarried men and women) related to gaining access to land appears highly problematic for the reason that other alternative sources of livelihoods are hardly available and if they do exist, are very limited.

Customarily, parents or close relatives carve a portion from their land for their children, which means a further shrinking of the landholding size. This and the associated fragmentation mostly result in 'unviable' land sizes that cannot enable their holders to meet livelihood requirements. The youth may also inherit the land belonging to their parents. What is of interest here is that those who have been allocated a piece of land by their parents or acquired it through inheritance tend to have much smaller plots and are finding it difficult to make a living. This way of access to a small plot of land often involves negotiations, and sometimes tensions and conflicts between household members. As a dynamic process in which more and more young people continue to demand rights to land access, the mechanisms available for meeting the needs of those with little or no land are currently limited. This situation particularly reflects the problems that young rural people face in getting access to land.

Most research on land issues tends to focus on demonstrating the size of land held by individual households at a particular time and emphasizing how small and fragmented landholdings have become (Jayne et al. 2003, Teklu 2004, Tolossa 2005a, Rahmato 2009). As a result, there has been no focus on investigating the means through which land is actually accessed within the prevailing context of land shortages, where the available landholdings are both intensively cultivated and often insufficient for household livelihood requirements due to continuing subdivisions. It is argued here that focusing on the dynamics of this issue is of great importance for understanding contemporary rural Ethiopia, particularly the predicaments of its youth. In absence of further land redistribution as an alternative

channel of access to land, there is a need to understand how rural people gain access to land and how the contemporary politics of land access shape and are shaped by social forces, political economic structures and processes, and local ecological dynamics.

It has often been argued that improved access to land among poor households would be an effective way out of poverty in the short-run (Jayne et al. 2003). However, this option appears problematic, as it is questionable whether much spare arable land is available to distribute; land pressure has already escalated in the study areas, which is further complicated by severe land degradations that affect the quality of land. For example, in one of the study *woredas* – Tach Gayint – most households often survive on small plots of land characterized by low or even declining productivity. Due to the inability of their agriculture-based livelihoods to generate adequate food and income, households have seen their livelihoods deteriorate while surviving on food aid. More strikingly, droughts have been recurring phenomena since the 1960s (though with spatial and temporal variations in severity), thus further exacerbating the problems of farming livelihoods (SERA project report 2000). This greatly erodes the assets of households, which in turn has a long-term impact on their livelihoods.[8] In addition, the limited availability of off-farm and non-farm employment opportunities has further complicated the pursuit of households to build viable livelihoods that are resilient to shocks and stresses. Moreover, the recent food price surge and high inflation (roughly since the mid-2000s) that engulfed the whole country have made survival much more difficult for the poor, and also for many of the peasant farmers, as they are food deficit producers and consumers at the same time. All these complex processes have continued to make poor households more vulnerable.

More generally speaking, land pressure is relatively less in some other parts of the country; nevertheless, institutional and administrative barriers, in particular the ethnicity based regionalization imposes severe constraints on the movement of households to settle in places where arable land is available (Devereux 2000: 7, Gebreselassie 2006: 5). It has often been argued that the lack of tenure security also constrains out-migration, as households might risk losing their land if left unfarmed for a certain period (Ellis 2006, Rahmato 2009). As noted by Ellis (2006: 394-95) the country's tenure system "represents an extreme case of institutional contexts…. that discourage people from making a clean break and leaving the land". The lack of tenure security, in addition to its impact on land conservation,

tends to trap the growing population to subsist on the continuously dwindling land resources. Therefore, it also constrains the capacity of households to negotiate the diversification of their livelihoods and their potential to engage in viable alternative off-farm and non-farm activities. This entrapment limits the expansion of the non-farm sector and constrains agrarian and rural change (ibid.).

In an effort to gain better insights in issues concerning rural land in the country (particularly in understanding recent shifts in political economy around land), the study also looks at recent trends in government-backed large-scale land acquisitions, both by domestic and international actors, in relatively sparsely populated and fertile parts of the country. It focuses on the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state, which is one of the areas where much of the current land acquisitions in the country are taking place. As noted, although decreasing availability of land is the order of the day in the Amhara study areas, the government has made 'available' millions of hectares of land for commercial agricultural investment, mainly in the lowland parts of the country. The government claims that the land offered is 'underutilized', 'unused' or 'idle', which partly implies that such land neither belongs to, nor is used, by anyone. However, this claim tends to overlook existing land-use types and different categories of users in these areas. An interesting point here is that the use of land mainly by pastoralists and shifting cultivators in those targeted lowland areas is contested by the state, in which their land uses have been perceived as essentially 'unsustainable' or inefficient (Markakis 2011, Rahmato 2011, Lavers 2012b). This official perception and image of existing land uses in the lowlands has been very formative in the design of state policy that focuses on leasing vast tracts of land to investors in those areas.

Large-scale land acquisitions do not always result in rural dwellers losing their land and having their livelihoods subverted, nor do those affected communities by such acquisitions necessarily engage in resistance, as this depends on multiple factors (Borras and Franco 2013). However, as is the case of Ethiopia, where the state formally owns the land and at the same time is sympathetic to large investments in land, it is rather common for local communities to lose out in the process, since they cannot effectively negotiate or defend their rights under a situation of wider inequalities in bargaining power (e.g., von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009, Vermeulen and Cotula 2010, Markakis 2011, Wolford et al. 2013). This is particularly

exacerbated in areas where the customary land rights of traditional cultivators and pastoralists are not respected, or where clearly defined property rights and effective judicial systems to protect such rights are weak or non-existent. Under such circumstances, this study argues that the land acquisitions threaten the economic, cultural, and ecological survival of local indigenous communities. In particular, the Gumuz ethnic groups, who depend on customary forms of land access and control, and whose livelihoods are based heavily on access to natural resources, are being differentially affected. Through a case study in some selected administrative *woredas* of the Benishangul-Gumuz region, this study examines the implications of recent large-scale land acquisitions for local communities and how these communities are engaging with or reacting to them.

Put together, this study is framed as a study of the land-livelihoods nexus in the context of two dramatic changes in objective conditions: (a) political-ecological changes in which the land-livelihoods nexus has been impacted in various ways (for example, climate change is increasing the incidence of drought, crop failure and loss of livestock, and accelerating deforestation and land degradation, directly affecting rural peoples' livelihoods), and (b) in the context of global land rush in which Ethiopia is a global hotspot. The result is that the already difficult situation of land control and dwindling land access by the rural poor has become even more difficult a challenge. These dynamics of the land-livelihood nexus and changes in the objective conditions within which this nexus exists, namely, political-ecological changes and global land rush are generally more assumed than demonstrated. The political challenge of effecting democratic land access in this changed context and its generational dimension is proving to be central – albeit generally ignored especially in the land and agrarian change studies in general and in global land rush debates in particular (White 2012).

Parting from the above formulated problematique, this study is undertaken with the following principal objectives:

- to understand the evolving complexity and local dynamics of access to and conflict over land using a political economy/ecology framework.
- to examine the ways through which the rural youth and households access land as well as the challenges and opportunities they face in their pathways to ensure their livelihood and food security.

- to analyze existing land tenure arrangements, the perceptions of tenure security and effects on the processes of land degradation and conservation.
- to examine the politics and implications of large-scale land acquisitions for local indigenous communities and their responses.

In order to reach these objectives and understand the complexity and dynamics of rural livelihoods, the choice has been made to focus on the role of land, which is often "the" scarce resource for rural smallholder producers, with economic, social and cultural values attached to it. This thesis deals with the following central research question followed by a series of specific research questions: How and to what extent has the Ethiopian rural land-livelihoods nexus been politically contested and transformed in the contemporary era of ecological change and global land rush? Specifically, part I of the thesis examines the following research questions that are specific to the study areas in the Amhara region:

1) How do particularly young rural people and their households gain access to land in contexts of overall land scarcity? What political economic processes and structures as well as ecological dynamics have been affecting access to and use of land, and how do such processes relate to land conflicts?
2) How does access to land affect rural livelihood strategies in particular regarding the existing options and decisions to engage in seasonal migration?
3) What is the nature and extent of land-related conflicts? How and to what extent have political economic, social and ecological contexts played a role in land conflicts?
4) What perceptions and experiences do households hold towards the existing land tenure system and their implications for tenure (in-) security, land conflicts and land conservation?

Part II of the thesis examines the politics and implications of large-scale land acquisitions in the Benishangul-Gumuz region. The following are the research questions:

5) What have been the implications of recent large-scale land acquisitions for local indigenous communities? What trends and contradictions exist around the land acquisition processes? How have

contests over land and authority been played out between the federal and regional state actors around the issue of land investments?

6) How do local indigenous communities perceive ongoing large-scale land acquisitions, and how have these communities been reacting to them? What are the emerging forms of local reactions?

The first four sets of questions guide the research in the Amhara region study areas while the last two sets of questions guide the fieldwork in the Benishagul-Gumuz region. These two regions – the Amhara and the Benishangul-Gumuz regions – were chosen as case study areas for a number of reasons. First, these regions represent contrasting settings in terms of landholding pattern, level of land shortage and land degradation. Rural areas of the Amhara region suffer from population pressure and are generally characterized by declining landholding size, land shortage, and land degradation while the Benishangul-Gumuz region is among those lowland regions which are sparsely populated by indigenous minority groups and where vast areas of 'unoccupied' or 'unused' land are claimed to exist. Second, the two regions differ in terms of land use and livelihood types practiced by rural people. In the Amhara region these are predominantly smallholder cultivators. However, indigenous rural groups in the Benishangul-Gumuz region rely mainly on shifting cultivation for their livelihood – supplemented with other livelihood activities such as hunting, gathering, fishing, livestock raising, traditional alluvial gold mining and honey collection. In its last two consecutive five-year development plans, the country has pursued a spatially differentiated strategy of promoting smallholder commercialization across much of its highland areas, on the one hand, and extensive large-scale commercial agriculture in lowland peripheral areas, on the other, leading to varied patterns of agrarian transformation. The detailed case studies in the two selected regions provide useful insights in understanding recent shifts in political economy around land access and use in the context of such a spatially differentiated state policy. The Benishangul-Gumuz region is among those lowland regions where indigenous minority ethnic groups face the threat of losing their land and livelihoods as a result of recent and ongoing large-scale land acquisitions by a wide range of actors such as the state, state-owned enterprises and private investors. This region therefore provides us with an opportunity to study the politics and implications of these ongoing large-scale land acquisitions for local indigenous communities and their responses to the land acquisitions. Third, while *de jure* state ownership of all land has been applied to

the whole country since 1975, in practice there is a regional variation, particularly between highland and lowland regions, in terms of *de facto* land tenure systems. Customary forms of tenure are still widely practiced in the lowlands, including the Benishangul-Gumuz region. Unlike the Amhara region, land registration and certification has not been undertaken in the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state. Because of recent large-scale land acquisitions, it is assumed that the *de facto* customary land-based social relationships in the lowland regions have been affected. It is therefore interesting to examine how such customary land tenure systems have been contested and transformed in the process. It is also interesting to examine the dynamics of land-livelihoods nexus in such varied contexts. Fourth, there is a need to understand the emergence of differentiated classes of labour related to the expansion of land acquisitions, including casual, seasonal and temporary forms of employment. Arguments for large-scale agricultural investments point to the creation of employment opportunities. Nevertheless, the purported employment benefits may not necessarily go to the same people who have lost their land resources or livelihoods as a result of the land acquisitions. Following the ongoing land acquisitions, there has been a growing influx of highland seasonal migrant labourers going to the lowlands. The Benishangul-Gumuz region is one of the main destinations for these seasonal agricultural wage labourers migrating mainly from the central highlands of the Amhara region related to expansion of large-scale land acquisitions in the region. Most of these seasonal migrant labourers are landless young men or those with smallholdings who are unable to provide for their families from such holdings in their home areas, and thus, these areas help us to explore the complexity and dynamics of such interactions in the context of ongoing large-scale land acquisitions. These underlying differences between the two regions necessitated the need to focus on different aspects of issues concerning land and livelihoods with particular relevance to each region. This, in turn, meant the use of different frameworks and methodologies for each, as will be discussed later in this and the next chapter. Although issues concerning land have always been politically contentious agendas in the country, the ways in which particular land issues play out vary from one context to another, particularly between highland and lowland regions. It is therefore through case studies drawn from contrasting settings, as designed in this study, that one can better understand the evolving complexity and dynamics of land-livelihoods nexus in contemporary rural Ethiopia.

Significance of the study

The significance of the study is multiple. First, it is a study of the land-livelihoods nexus in era of ecological change, in which climate change has been increasing the incidence of drought, crop failure and livestock loss, and is accelerating deforestation and land degradation. This particularly affects poor rural people more directly, and many already have to cope with land degradation and increased climate variability. The links between land and livelihoods need to be researched to better understand the dynamics in its particular local and regional context. A comprehensive understanding of the evolving realities of rural livelihoods thus requires a close scrutiny of access to resources, assets and markets and diverse livelihood strategies pursued in response to prevailing constraints and opportunities. Given the sheer size of the population living in rural areas – estimated at 84% of the country's total population in 2007 (CSA 2008) – and its predominant dependence on land for its livelihood, it is increasingly recognized that food security and poverty reduction will not be achievable without explicitly focusing on the role of access to and control of agricultural land and, the social and power relations and the politics of access. Little is known of the ways rural young people access land and other productive resources in the changing contexts of dwindling land resources. More importantly, this study provides empirical evidence on the nexus between land and livelihoods, drawing from both relatively food secure areas, and cases among the most vulnerable *woredas* that are identified as being drought prone, highly food insecure, and with a long history of dependence on food aid.

Particularly, as the country with relatively the most degraded land in Africa (UNECA 2009: 129, Campbell 1991: 5), land degradation is of critical concern in Ethiopia, which is a very crucial constraint to any effort towards ensuring food security, environmental sustainability and combating poverty. More specifically, it appears to threaten the livelihoods of the rural poor who are intimately tied to the 'scarce' land resource for their living in the study areas. In this respect, a substantial amount of studies were conducted in the country drawing from a Malthusian perspective (that is, putting the blame primarily on rapid population growth). In addition, the issue of land tenure security has been one of the key concerns that have figured prominently in the debate over the causes of land degradation. This line of argument has been predominantly used in identifying the cause of land degradation in the country, in which the sense of tenure

insecurity (associated with the continued state ownership of land) was blamed. By going beyond these simplistic explanations, this study focuses on farmers' own perceptions, particularly their understanding and interpretation of land degradation and its causes, by situating the analysis within their specific socio-economic, political and ecological contexts under which degradation takes place.

Second, the thesis is a cutting edge study on land-livelihoods nexus in the era of global land rush. Recent trends in large-scale land acquisitions by powerful actors have raised concerns about its impact on the livelihoods of local people who depend on agricultural land and forest resources for their survival. As this study is partly conducted in one of the regions where the current land acquisitions are taking place, it sheds light on the heightened concern about the wider social, economic and political implications that the land acquisitions would entail. It sheds light on what land acquisitions mean to the rural poor and how this current situation creates apprehension and complicates the prospects of rural people to maintain their access to land and natural resources. This is especially the case for those needing land the most, which include, among others, ethnic minorities, indigenous people, pastoralists and peasants.

Third, it is a study of the political economy of land and livelihoods in the era of both environmental change and global land rush viewed from a generational angle. The study focuses on the challenges of the youth in gaining access to land in the context of overall land scarcity and progressive dwindling of landholding size. In addition, the study looks at the implications of ongoing large-scale land acquisitions for the livelihoods of rural people, among others, the youth.

This study, therefore, contributes to a broader understanding of the relationship between the political economy of land and livelihoods in rural Ethiopia. It puts livelihoods in a broader perspective so as to look at the complex issues of rural development that could contribute in designing effective poverty reduction policies and programmes in the development endeavours of the country. It provides policy-relevant insights for policy makers to view the land issue as a means of household access to broader entitlements that are basic for building their livelihoods. At the same time, it informs policies about the critical challenges prevailing in rural areas that continue to threaten the viability of livelihoods. It also provides contextual evidence to inform the growing debate on the land issue in the country. Given the multiple constraints and growing challenges in rural areas, the

study contributes to the field by providing updates on the conceptualization of access to land as a viable way to address rural poverty.

1.3 Theoretical framework on land-livelihoods nexus

This section introduces a selection of pertinent theoretical and analytical perspectives that are relevant to examine the land-livelihoods nexus. Methodologically and analytically, this study embodies a multidisciplinary orientation and attempts to integrate pertinent perspectives. The most important ones – which are reviewed here – include agrarian political economy, the livelihoods approach, and the political ecology approach; albeit several overlaps exist between them. These approaches are briefly summarized in order to show their relevance by looking at their associated theories, concepts and limitations in framing the research problems. The perspectives reviewed here attempt to make a theoretical link between vulnerability, land and livelihoods in the context of Ethiopia.

Agrarian political economy

The research questions raised in this study are approached with the tools of agrarian political economy, which helps to achieve an understanding of, and gain a critical insight into the range of contemporary rural and agrarian issues. Agrarian political economy has long been commonly used as a key analytical framework in assessing the social, political and economic dynamics of rural and agrarian change. Its emphasis is on investigating "the social relations and dynamics of production and reproduction, property and power in agrarian formations and their processes of change, both historical and contemporary" (quoted from the mission statement of the *Journal of Agrarian Change* by Bernstein 2010: 1). The framework helps us to understand the contemporary processes of agrarian change, including rural resource access and use, land conflicts and key socio-political and economic processes facing rural areas (Akram-Lodhi 2007).

The link between land and livelihoods in Ethiopia, as is the case in so many sub-Saharan African countries, is predicated on the fact that farming has been most important for the livelihoods of the overwhelming majority, and that access to land is critical. It is particularly in rural areas that the country's main development challenges exist, related to the agricultural sector. While numerous scholars have theorized various understandings of the 'peasant mode of production' (Hyden 1980, 1983, Waters 2007), the general sense that emerged was that "the peasant economy was tied to the

wider political economy in ways that extracted surplus value from rural areas, that constrained peasant access to resources (primarily land) and that involved very unfavorable relationships between rural people and both the market and state" (Bebbington 1999: 2024). Accordingly, peasants have provided not only cheap food but also cheap labour to the economy as many may lack access to enough land and therefore resort to selling their labour in order to reproduce themselves (Bebbington 1999, Mueller 2011). The theories of social differentiation and concepts associated with the structure and exercise of power at various levels are very important in order to understand conditions prevailing in rural and agrarian sectors. Viewed broadly, various factors such as socio-economic and demographic factors affect differentiation. Although the notion of rural differentiation was theorized in various ways, the unifying argument was to refrain from treating "peasants as if they were homogenous categories" (Isaacman 1990: 13). The earliest analysis of agrarian differentiation was the debate between the Marxists and the neo-populists, often personified as the 'Lenin-Chayanov debate', on the 'agrarian question' in rural Russia (Bernstein 2009).

Based on empirical analysis, Lenin (1967) differentiated peasants by their incomes, ownership of means of production and degree of reliance on wage labour. These differentiated classes were the rich, middle and poor peasants. The rich peasants (rural 'capitalists') were those who actively engaged in agricultural commodity markets: they owned large landholdings, produced predominantly for the market and relied on hired wage labour. The middle peasants only owned enough land for the subsistence needs of their families. Finally, the poor peasants were those who participated in wage labour markets because they lacked access to land as a means of subsistence (Byres 1986). Accordingly, Lenin observed that the dominant pattern that prevailed in rural areas was not only such a socially differentiated one, but also that the process of differentiation was structural. He argued that peasant class formation was both the "expression and the driver of the development of capitalism in the countryside" (Bernstein 2009: 58). Lenin therefore argued that the dynamics of capitalist development in agriculture intensifies the process of social differentiation, which over time would lead to the disappearance of the peasantry as a distinct social formation. Accordingly, capitalism was envisioned to further encroach on to rural society which would eventually lead to the dissolution of the middle peasantry (in which a minority of them were anticipated to

join the rich peasants while the majority would slide to poor peasants), on the one hand, and the complete transformation of poor peasants into wage labourers, on the other (Mueller 2011: 27, Bernstein 2009). The long-term consequence of this process would therefore be the polarization of rural societies and the subsequent formation of two classes: landless wage labourers and capitalist farmers (Lenin 1967). Lenin explained that factors such as migration and feudal relations determine the rate of capitalist development in agriculture (encroachment of capitalism). He observed that while migration was conceived as a major factor that accelerates the disintegration of the peasantry, the existence of feudal types of relations in which peasants are not separated from their means of production (particularly land) and are subjected to extra-economic coercion was seen as a major obstacle that would retard the process of capitalist accumulation. Therefore, it can be asserted that "any condition that prevents the direct producer from being 'freed in the double sense' – free to move and choose their master, but also free from the means of subsistence (that is, land) – will retard the disintegration of the peasantry, and therewith the transition to capitalism, or in other words, the solution to the agrarian question" (Mueller 2011: 27). His conception of the process of peasant differentiation was focused on shifts in the patterns of control over agrarian means of production and its accompanying social division of labour (White 1989). The mechanisms of such shifts would be found in the penetration or expansion of commodity production in agriculture. Specifically, some of the causes include the existence of institutions of private property rights over land, differential productivity, competition, mechanisms of partial or total dispossession of means of production, the use of wage labour, unequal exchange, various forms of agricultural surplus extraction, and local experience of agrarian struggles (ibid).

In contrast to Lenin's analysis of peasant differentiation based on class relations (class differentiation), Chayanov's 'theory of the peasant economy' (Chayanov 1966) conceptualized social differentiation based on the demographic life cycle ('demographic differentiation'). He theorized the peasant economy as a particular kind of economy with its own growth dynamics and motivation. He considered the peasant economy as being made up of 'family labour farms' operating with their own economic calculations based on household subsistence needs rather than profit maximization. Central to his theory was the notion of 'a labour-consumer balance', in which a peasant household would base its production and

consumption decisions on the ratio of working household members (producers – working adults) to all household members (consumers – working adults plus non-working members such as children and the elderly). This balance shifts at different stages in the family life cycles, that is, depending on the demographic processes of family growth. In his theory, 'a family labour farm' was not envisaged to remain static but to change over time in terms of both family size and cultivated land. When married couples start to have children successively, their family size grows and this in turn necessitates more land to feed the growing family. Accordingly, rural communities periodically redistribute land to respond to those who needed more land. Therefore, the size of the cultivated land would adjust according to changes in family size. Since family size is the factor that determines farm size, apparent differences in farm size cultivated at a particular time would be explained largely by variations in family size, implying no or very little inequality of landholding among peasants (which, if it existed, was a temporary aspect). That is, access to land would change in a predictable pattern over the family life cycle, as farmers receive land consistent to their family size (Patnaik 1979: 380, Schulman et al. 1989: 526).

For Chayanov therefore the main cause of inequality among peasants, particularly in terms of land size cultivated and labour, was not due to class formation but related to the demographic processes of family growth. In so doing, he argued that differentiation was primarily a demographic phenomenon, and that peasants did not become agrarian capitalists and proletariats as a result of social factors (Chayanov 1966: 254). Nevertheless "one should by no means conclude that there is no true social differentiation among the peasantry to distinguish one farm from another, not quantitatively but qualitatively" (ibid.: 254). Clearly, these notions put him in opposition to Lenin's emphasis on the unequal distribution of the means of production that generate exploitative production relations in rural areas (Patnaik 1979: 380).

Chayanov's arguments have been widely debated. Particularly, his emphasis on self-sufficient and self-regulating, economically identical peasant households – to the exclusion of the nature of relation of production (the relation between peasants and landlords) in which they operated – is criticized (Patnaik 1979). In addition, his assumption that cultivable land is infinitely elastic, adjusting to changes in family size, is also questioned (ibid.).

No matter how contested the conceptualization of rural differentiation has been, rural communities cannot be portrayed as undifferentiated social categories. Specifically, "how can we think about [rural communities] without reducing them to a homogenous block?" (Isaacman 1990: 14). It is interesting to note that differentiation "can occur in contexts of a stagnating, expanding, or declining rural economy, although the forms which differentiation takes in each case would probably be different" (White 1989: 20). Pointing to the problems that characterize classic agrarian political economy theories of rural differentiation, White (1989) emphasizes that an open and flexible framework is needed to understand the dynamic processes of socio-economic differentiation at work in a particular context, relating local processes to larger political-economic factors. In the context of Ethiopia, "class differentiation emerging from within the peasantry would be a thing of the past" (Rahmato 2009: 322). This has been particularly the case because "the existing land system discourages rural differentiation based on land size" (ibid.: 305). Variations or inequalities in landholdings among households have narrowed down through past periodic land redistributions and other measures which were manifestations of the country's land system after the land reform of 1975 (ibid.) – although some other scholars claim that inequality in landholdings in rural Ethiopia is in fact high (Kebede 2008). However, this study does not, analytically, consider the rural communities of the study areas to be homogenous social categories and thus views rural communities as internally differentiated along the dimensions of gender, class, generation, livelihoods type and diversity, ethnicity, and ecology. These include smallholder farmers, landless rural labourers, youth, seasonal migrants, highlanders and lowlanders, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, and shifting cultivators – both men and women. Particularly, understanding the young generation and their livelihoods requires a relational approach that situates the youth in terms of the dynamcis of their relationship with other categories (adults) within larger social structures (White 2011, 2012).

Generally, "the debate between Lenin and Chayanov, or between those who embrace a position broadly similar to Lenin's or Chayanov's, has lost neither its relevance nor its force in relation to today's poor countries" (Byres 1986: xxi, see also Borras 2009, Bernstein 2009, White and Dasgupta 2010, Fairbairn et al. 2014). In fact, recent debates on smallholder versus large-scale farming focused on the role of agriculture for achieving development and poverty reduction have reinforced the original debate

between Marxists and neo-populists. An important issue in this regard has been the Chayanovian conceptions that smallholder farms produce a higher output per acre compared to capitalist farms and are therefore more efficient (Mueller 2011, van der Ploeg 2013). The viability of peasant farming was emphasized especially in terms of their ability to ensure self-sufficiency and food security and achieve poverty reduction (van der Ploeg 2013, 2014).

Because of recent expansions in large-scale land acquisitions (since roughly the mid-2000s), current discussions about their implications for agrarian structural change and processes of social differentiation have attracted great academic and political attention. It has been argued that current trends of large-scale land transfers to private and public investors would lead to a type of agrarian structure and relation that produce the processes of accumulation that are ostensibly predicated upon mechanisms of social differentiation (e.g., Akram-Lodhi 2008: 1160, Kay 2009: 128, McMichael 2008, Veltmeyer 2004). Consequently, this shift would eventually further the process of rural class differentiation and increase the marginalization of poor rural people, which in turn would lead to depeasantization and mass rural proletarianization. Notwithstanding this articulation, Rahmato (2009) argues that rural class differentiation is not detrimental, so long as it takes its own natural course. Rahmato rightly argues that agrarian transformation achieved through the agency of smallholder peasants turning into commercial farmers would bring about a change that would be more sustainable than the one spearheaded by investors or landed classes. He further argues that this route does not involve large-scale peasant dispossession and displacements from land, nor the transformation of peasants into wage labourers, and thus is critical to ensure local food security and accumulation. In his own words:

> I believe such a farmer will not be driven by the brutal ethos of naked capitalism but will instead engage in a form of enterprise combining capitalist and associative elements such as co-operatives, peer-based credit services, group-based investment ventures, and environmental-friendly management practices. …If eventually the dissolution of the peasantry is to occur, it will occur through the internal evolution of that class and the emergence of different social forces within it (Rahmato 2009: 350).

In an era of neo-liberal hegemony, it has also been argued that the ever larger looming of corporate agriculture accelerates the commodification of land by a class of emerging agrarian capitalist bourgeoisie interested in

the productive and speculative use of land resources contributing to ongoing 'accumulation by dispossession' (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009: 324-7, Harvey 2003; see also Clapp 2014, Fairbairn 2014 on financialization of farmland).

Borras and Franco (2012) rightly argued that the analysis of the dynamics of change in land use and land property relations constituted in 'land grabs' should be brought to the core of current debates for any serious understanding of the politics of global land grabbing. For that, they emphasize the need to employ class analysis to gain better insights. They argue that contemporary land grabs result in changes in land property relations with a strong tendency to favouring dominant groups while dispossessing and displacing poor rural people.

Land-use changes denote a key notion in debates about current (trans)national commercial land deals. The critics of the current 'global land grab' focus on the changes brought to existing land uses, with its far-reaching implications for the food security and livelihoods of those who have been using it. While a particular land-use change has its own specific features and directions, it must also, at least, relate to broad typologies.

The dominant land grab narrative primarily focused on the conversion of lands previously used for the production of food crops or forestry purposes for domestic use to export-oriented food and biofuel production. This narrative, however, falls short of helping us more closely comprehend the complex specificities of current land-use changes. This in turn urges a re-focus on the theme so as to avoid the oversimplification of emerging trends and their associated socioeconomic and political correlates.

In delineating the trajectories of the current large-scale shifts in land-use, Borras and Franco (2012) provide a detailed framework for a systematic analysis of the underlying pattern of emerging changes for a better understanding of how and why such changes occur, as well as their implications for local land-users. They observe that current trends of land-use change surging in Africa and elsewhere have many faces, though may differ from one setting to the next.

They also identify four broadly distinct typologies of current land-use changes and emphasize that there are many different sub-variants within each of these four main patterns. The first broad type of land-use shifts points towards changes occurring within the food-oriented production. In

this case, the land continues to be dedicated to the production of food crops, yet features change in the purpose of production. Here, the change in the purpose of production involved commoditization away from producing for local consumption. It denotes a change from food production meant for consumption or domestic exchange to export-oriented food production. The other sub-variant within this broad category follows the opposite trajectory, with land previously dedicated for the production of food crops and animal feed for the export market being converted into small-scale farm units in order to produce food for domestic use and exchange.

The second main typology involves change in land use from food to biofuel production. Under this category, some of the current global land deals involved the conversion of lands devoted for food production to corporate-driven biofuel production for export and/or for local consumption and the domestic market. It could also be a type of change to biofuel production at the community level for household needs and local consumption.

The third type presents a land-use change in which lands devoted to 'non-food' uses such as forestlands, grasslands, wetlands and 'wastelands' are being converted to food production purposes. The fourth broad pattern of change represents the conversion of forest, 'marginal' and 'waste' lands to biofuel production that can be used for local consumption/exchange purposes or for exports (ibid.).

Borras and Franco's typologies provide a suggestive framework for analyzing the socioeconomic and political dynamics of changes in land use and their implications for different social classes and groups.

Among the classic literature and theoretical formulations, Polanyi's argument about 18th century enclosures has its relevance as a theoretical foundation for looking at contemporary enclosures in developing countries. He is very critical of the market system, particularly regarding its 'vagaries' and 'perils'. He offers explanations as to how people faced with exploitation agitated against displacements that threatened the fabric of society through enclosures that had "deprived the country folk of their homes and plots, and thrown them on the labor market" (Polanyi 1944). As a way out, Polanyi (1944) therefore suggests that de-commodifying the "fictitious commodities of labor, land, and money" are necessary prerequisites for the emancipation of society from the manacles of the market. Another important line of thinking is a well-known work by Harvey (2003)

on the new mechanisms of 'accumulation by dispossession'. Harvey is critical of mainstream development under capitalism, which is a helpful stance to take when conceptualizing the commodification of land and forceful expulsion of peasants in the developing world today.

In the context of the recent wave of land acquisitions over the past decade, many scholars have stressed the key role of the state in order to understand how land acquisitions are shaping and being shaped by the state (Wolford et al. 2013, Burnod et al. 2013, Peters 2013a). Here the state is not conceived of as an actor with a unified voice and internal consistency in its agenda; rather, the state itself is a site of struggle over resources, power and authority among its various constituents (Moore 1993, Watts 1989). As Watts put it, "the state [can] be opened as a theatre in which resources, property rights, and authority are struggled over" (Watts 1989: 4). Thus, there is a need "to unbundle the state, to see government and governance as processes, people and relationships" to gain a better insight with regard to the role of the state in the land acquisitions (Wolford et al. 2013: 189). More specifically, Wolford et al. (2013) emphasized the "need to know more about the nature of states themselves; …the motivations of particular actors as well as the capacity of governments and the political cultures that shape the path from policy to practice" (ibid.: 191).

It has also been argued that investigating the implication of large-scale land acquisitions for local land rights requires the analysis of not only the 'bundle of rights' over land and other resources but also the 'bundle of powers' – the range of formal and informal powers – embodied in and exercised by different actors (Ribot and Peluso 2003). It follows that access to land is not about rights only. Rather, it is more akin to power, implicating a wider range of social and political relationships that can constrain or enable various actors to benefit from resources for themselves or to facilitate the access of others by exercising "access control" (ibid.: 158). It "focuses on the issues of who does (and who does not) get to use what, in what ways, and when (that is, in what circumstances)" (Neale 1998 quoted in Ribot and Peluso 2003: 154). It is therefore critical to analyze the various dynamic mechanisms, processes, and social relations that configure one's access to land and other productive resources. Additionally, Bernstein's (2010) key questions in agrarian political economy provide a framework for understanding contemporary agrarian relations. These questions include: Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? And what do they do with it? (ibid.: 20). In sum, this study greatly benefits from

engaging with numerous works inspired by agrarian political economy as bases of its analytical framework, and the concepts and tools to be used and applied.

Livelihoods perspectives

As already outlined in the preceding section, the contemporary dynamics of the land-livelihoods nexus can be properly understood from within the perspective of agrarian political economy. It can be used to analyze the dynamic mechanisms, processes and relations that configure rural people's access to land, and to analyze the dynamics of conflict over land. The framework is also used in the analysis of questions pertinent to large-scale land acquisitions, such as: understanding the nature, motivation and capacity of the state and other actors; analyzing how different actors at various levels interact and react; identifying trends around the dynamics of power and elites; and exploring political reactions 'from below' as well as for situating the land acquisitions in cross-scale dynamic changes. Integrating with the agrarian political economy, the livelihoods perspective is used to analyze the complexity and diversity of rural livelihoods.

Persistent rural poverty continues to be one of the most striking challenges of the developing world. Rural poverty results from and is deeply rooted in a multitude of factors that cannot be approached in a simplistic way. Conceptualizing and fundamentally understanding rural poverty require critical theoretical perspectives that can enable a deep engagement with the issues of rural poverty.

A livelihoods perspective is among one of the major perspectives on rural development of the past three decades. It has gained wide support as a guiding principle for rural development analysis and practice.

The livelihoods approach seems to be applied to a wide range of issues (Scoones 2009: 179), having originated from earlier works on vulnerability and famines (Sen 1981, Swift 1989, Davis 1996) and strands of livelihood ideas that developed through the 1980s and 1990s (Chambers 1983, Chambers and Conway 1992, Bernstein et al. 1992, Carney 1998, Scoones 1998, Bebbington 1999, Ellis 2000).

In particular, the approach draws from Amartya Sen's (1981) seminal work on famines and food security. The 'asset vulnerability framework', which is the focus of the livelihoods approach, arises from the literature on famines, enabling the approach to engage with factors that make rural households vulnerable to shocks and stresses, and identify policies and

processes that can improve their resilience in the face of disaster (Ellis and Biggs 2001: 445). The work of Chambers (1983) on the multiple realities of rural poverty also gave inspirational insights to the origin of the livelihoods approach. In addition, insights into what constitutes household vulnerability was also provided by Blaikie et al. (1994) through their access model that suggested the level of access to resources determines the vulnerability of households, partly building on Sen's entitlement work.

In general, the emphasis of a livelihoods perspective is mainly on the importance of access to productive assets and resources that are essential for increasing the productivity and reducing the vulnerability of the rural poor (Scoones 2009). Therefore, what remains key in this approach is the concept of multiple and diverse livelihoods that are built on the basis of a combination of capabilities, assets, and activities required to cope with and recover from stresses and shocks – such as droughts, floods, famines, and epidemics (Chambers and Conway 1992).

Drawing from the work of Chambers and Conway (1992), the concept of 'a livelihood' is understood to comprise "the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living" (Carney 1998: 2). The approach hinges upon the recognition of access to assets by the poor, individuals or households, as fundamental elements to understanding livelihood options, survival strategies and vulnerabilities to adverse trends and events (Ellis 2000: 28). It puts more explicit emphasis on the different kinds of assets possessed by the rural poor that can be utilized or built upon to enhance the resilience and security of their livelihoods (Carney 1998, Scoones 1998, Bebbington 1999, Ellis 2000).

Accordingly, the first key component that the approach elucidates is the assets owned, controlled, claimed or accessed, which are basic to households, and upon which production and engagement in labour markets and exchange take place. The material and social assets in rural livelihoods are classified into natural, human, physical, financial, social (Carney 1998, Scoones 1998) and political capital (Devereux et al. 2003, Baumann 2000, see also De Haan and Zoomers 2005 for its justification). These assets are 'stocks of capital' that can be used directly or indirectly to generate a household's means of survival. As stocks of capital, assets exist either as a stock (e.g., land), or as the result of surplus generated between production and consumption, which enables an investment in future productive capacity (Ellis 2000: 31). In the same sense, Bebbington (1999:

2022) explained that assets or capitals "are not simply resources that people use in building livelihoods: they are assets that give them the capability to be and to act." Analyzing rural livelihoods based on access to a range of assets helps us to examine the role of different types of assets and understand the means through which individuals, households and communities deal with poverty. This analysis can also help us to understand how the possessed asset portfolios determine the livelihood strategies pursued. Bebbington (1999) further explains the relationship between assets and capabilities, particularly by viewing "assets not only as things that allow survival, adaptation and poverty alleviation: they are also the basis of agents' power to act and to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources" (ibid.: 2022). The notion of access to assets, therefore, extends to have far-reaching implications for rural people, and offers a means of living to vital roles in providing people with the power to question and challenge the underlying structures hampering livelihood security.

The second key feature of the livelihoods approach is its emphasis on factors and processes that mediate access to a set of assets or resources that are required to construct viable livelihood strategies. The livelihood mediating factors and processes are categorized into different (though more or less related) groups by different scholars (Carney 1998, Scoones 1998, Reardon and Vosti 1995, Ellis 2000). For instance, the mediating process can be categorized into contexts, conditions and trends – which include history, politics, economy, climate, demography, agroecology, and social differentiation, on the one hand, and institutions and organizations on the other (Scoones 1998). Similarly, it can be categorized between the vulnerability contexts and transforming processes (Carney 1998): the vulnerability contexts encompass many of the factors mentioned under contexts provided by Scoones but policies, institutions, laws, incentives, and social relations comprise the transforming processes (Ellis 2000). Based on the insights of Scoones (1998) and Carney (1998), Ellis (2000) stratifies key factors that influence household access to resources in the pursuit of a viable livelihood; he distinguishes two categories of social relations: institutions and organizations on the one hand, and trends and shock factors, on the other.

According to Ellis (2000: 39), social relations, institutions and organizations represent critical mediating factors and processes that (re-) shape livelihoods. They are critical in the sense that they comprise the agencies

that enhance or constrain livelihood choices by individuals or households. These social factors and processes mediating people's access to resources and livelihood strategies are key elements by which they are examined under social capital in a livelihoods approach. As access to different types of assets, opportunities and services form the foundations of the livelihoods approach, it is defined and redefined by the rules, and social norms and relations that influence the differential ability of households to own, control, claim, or make use of resources such as land and common property resources (ibid.). Land, for example, is one of the crucial natural capitals in rural areas, whereby access to this critical resource is mediated by institutions such as land tenure institutions and policies (Scoones 1998, 2009, Ellis 2000). In this case, Bebbington (1999: 2022) noted the centrality of access to land such that it is "perhaps the most critical resource of all if people are to build sustainable, poverty alleviating rural livelihoods."

The construction of livelihood strategies depends on the assets that individuals or households have access to, as mediated by various factors and processes – such as social relations, institutional processes and organizational structures, and trends and shocks. Livelihood strategies tend to respond dynamically to changing conditions of pressures and opportunities, in order to better cope and adapt to such changing contexts. The strategies are composed of a portfolio of activities that provide the means of household survival (Ellis 2000: 40). Based on resource availability and access, Scoones (1998), for instance, identifies three household livelihood strategies in rural areas that include agricultural intensification or extensification, livelihood diversification, and migration. In the livelihoods approach, it is therefore conceptualized that access to resources mediated by various factors in the process of constructing livelihood strategies results in a type of livelihood outcome that can be viewed as 'livelihood security' or 'vulnerable livelihoods'. Despite this, it is not an easy exercise to make generalizations about livelihood strategy categories, as they depend on various factors. Zoomers (2001: 246), for instance, provided a detailed account of the reasons why it is impossible to draw generalizations about rural livelihoods or make fixed categories. Livelihood strategies arise in different geographic settings representing part of a specific context that makes comparison difficult. There are variations with regard to starting points in each household, driving forces behind livelihood strategies, distribution of roles among and within households, variations in opportunities and personal abilities which make the attempt to present a fixed typology of livelihood

strategies futile. Zoomers concluded that "[g]eneralizing about livelihood strategies is a dangerous thing to do. Livelihood is like a pandora's box: there are many concealed aspects inside it. …..livelihood strategies are a moving target. They should be conceived of as a stage, not as a structural category" (ibid.: 247). This emphasizes the palpable need to analyze and understand the underlying localized issues in rural livelihoods at various levels, particularly at household and community levels. This also recalls "the need to understand the diversity of rural areas and the complexity of livelihoods and livelihood strategies" (Ashley and Maxwell 2001: 401).

The livelihoods perspective, as already indicated, starts with an explicit recognition of rural livelihoods as a complex and dynamic terrain, and thus realizes the multiple realities of the rural poor. In the words of one of its most prominent and enthusiastic proponents:

> Livelihood perspectives offer a unique starting point for an integrated analysis of complex, highly dynamic rural contexts. Drawing on diverse disciplinary perspectives and cutting across sectoral boundaries, livelihoods perspectives provide an essential counter to the monovalant approaches that have dominated development enquiry and practice. With more complexity, more diversity and more uncertainty about possible rural futures such an embedded approach is, as is argued here, essential (Scoones 2009: 183).

Being based on people-centered principles, and characterized as participatory, holistic, and integrative, the approach gained momentum in development policy and practice over the last decade. It has been applied to a range of intersecting themes such as HIV/AIDS (Masanjala 2007), migration (de Haan et al. 2002, Ellis 2003), destitution (Devereux et al. 2003), livelihood diversification (Ellis 1998, 2000, Carswell 2002, Bryceson 1999), food security (Tolossa 2005a), natural resource management (Bauman 2000, Pound et al. 2003), and agrarian change (Bryceson 2000a, 2002).

The crucial attribute of the livelihoods approach is its focus on the assets and diverse livelihood strategies of households viewed within the scope of underlying vulnerability and institutional settings, where access to key resources such as land is examined. Land constitutes 'a fundamental livelihood asset' in the rural economy (Quan 2000: 32). As the principal form of natural capital, land (which comprises cropland, rangelands and forest lands) is a critical resource upon which farming households depend for their food security and livelihoods (ibid.). In addition, the importance of land goes beyond the current generation in the sense that "as a heritable

asset, land is the basis for the wealth and livelihood security of future rural generations" (ibid. 2000: 32). The livelihoods perspective acknowledges the importance of land to the livelihoods of poor people. More explicitly, it engages with access to various assets by rural people, and analyzes the structures and processes which influence how those assets are accessed and then utilized to generate a means of livelihood (Ashley and Maxwell 2001: 411).

Being focused on the resources, activities and access issues, the approach offers a way of analyzing the complexity and diversity of rural livelihoods in which poor rural people make a living out of a complex mix of activities. For instance, it has been argued that migration is one out of a combination of livelihood strategies pursued by poor rural households (de Haan et al. 2002, Ellis 2000, Tolossa 2005a). Moreover, "a more accurate understanding of the roles of migration can be achieved by taking a livelihoods approach with its emphasis on assets, activities and outcomes within vulnerability and institutional contexts" (Ellis 2003: 9).

In a livelihoods perspective, it is thus a combination of various assets, activities, and social relations that form the basic components of the process of securing viable livelihoods and reducing the vulnerability of poor people to shocks and stresses through their strengthened livelihood resilience (Ellis 2000, Cousins and Scoones 2010). The approach can be summarized as focusing on three aspects: the diversity of rural livelihoods, the role of different types of assets, and the importance of the wider social, political and economic environment in mediating access to a range of resources (Dorward et al. 2001).

The approach, however, is not without pitfalls. Despite the multiple strong features of the approach, some scholars (Appendini 2001, Murray 2002, O'Laughlin 2004, De Haan and Zoomers 2005) expressed their skepticism regarding the ability of the approach to engage and link livelihoods with the wider debates in development. This is because some key issues remained unaddressed or simply treated implicitly, and thus warned against the dewy-eyed optimism of the livelihoods perspectives.

O'Laughlin (2004), using a political economy framework, criticized the livelihoods approach which neglects structural foundations of inequalities underlying poverty that are rooted in class and gender relations. In her own words, O'Laughlin points out that:

> Documenting complexity and diversity in the livelihoods of the poor does not assist very much in identifying the relations of inequality that underlie poverty, most of which extend far beyond the boundaries of local communities and livelihood groups. Class, not as an institutional contextual variable, but as a relational concept, is absent from the discourse of livelihoods. Accordingly political space is very limited – focusing mainly on 'empowering' the poor, without being clear about how this process takes place or who might have to be 'disempowered' for it to occur (2004: 387).

She emphasized in her reflections that politics are almost absent from the livelihoods framework, in which basic questions of political economy are only treated as the contexts of analysis than being the subject. Livelihoods approach supporters De Haan and Zoomers also pointed out some of the major challenges of the approach, which they argued prevented the approach from making a greater contribution to the understanding the livelihoods of poor people. They argued that the livelihoods approach puts more focus on capitals and activities, and tends to overlook the role of structural features that influence access to livelihood opportunities. As a result, key variables (particularly power relations) have been overlooked in its conceptualization of access to resources (De Haan and Zoomers 2005).

Despite this, Scoones and Wolmer (2003: 5) argued that:

> A sustainable livelihoods approach has encouraged, for some, a somewhat deeper and critical reflection. This arises in particular from looking at the consequence of development efforts from a local-level perspective, making the links from the micro-level, situated particularities of poor people's livelihoods to wider-level institutional and policy framings at district, provincial, national and even international levels. Such reflections therefore put into sharp relief the importance of complex institutional and governance arrangements, and the key relationships between livelihoods, power and politics.

In a recent (self) critical assessment, however, Scoones (2009) himself provides a detailed account on the major recurrent failings of the livelihoods perspective, which need to be addressed more explicitly in order to enable the perspective to have continued relevance and application as 'an important lens' to look at complex rural development questions.[9] Scoones identifies four persistent failings of the livelihoods approach, also echoed in O'Laughlin's (2004) reflection, including: lack of engagement in addressing wider global-scale processes and their links to livelihoods at the

local level; lack of emphasis on politics and power relations; lack of concern for global environmental change; and lack of attention to engaging with debates about long-term trends in rural economies and wider questions about agrarian change. Against this backdrop, Scoones argues for "a re-energising of livelihoods perspectives with new foci and priorities" (2009: 183) in order to reverse these failings and to reinvigorate the approach for new contemporary challenges. As a result, he suggests a more explicit theorization of key issues mentioned above, with particular attention to power relations, basic questions of political economy[10], processes of globalization, and cross-scale dynamic changes.

Political ecology approach

Key concepts of political ecology were purposely adopted to complete our analytical framework. This approach focuses particularly on interactions of economic, social and political processes and the physical environment, and analyzes land tenure through questions such as 'who controls what resources' and how that affects land degradation.[11] The main concepts of political ecology are key to understanding relationships between land tenure, land degradation and livelihoods situated in the context of environmental and climate change.

Although land degradation can be attributed to a wide array of factors such as biophysical factors, population pressure and farming practices, and technologies used, the role of various institutions, processes and actors in causing and perpetuating degradation should not be overlooked (Homer-Dixon 1999, Leach and Mearns 1996).

Nevertheless, some dominant development perspectives in a Malthusian line of argument have preferred to put all the blame on poor people for causing environmental degradation, overlooking the role and dynamics of various social, economic and political processes. Such thinking placed particular emphasis on the interface between poverty and land degradation. Discussions on environmental degradation were often focused on the discourse of poverty-environment interactions, where poverty was identified as a major factor contributing to environmental degradation (World Bank 1996). This poverty-environmental degradation nexus is based on the argument that poor people generally depend on environmental resources for their livelihoods, have short time horizons, and therefore are 'unable' and 'unwilling' to invest in resource conservation – implying that the poor value the present over future goals (ibid.). However, this

conception of the behaviour of poor people has been countered by several empirical studies (Watts 1983, Rahmato 1987, de Waal 1989, Davis 1996) conducted in different parts of sub-Saharan Africa, showing the willingness of poor people to make a sacrifice in the present in order to enhance and secure their future livelihoods. Some studies also suggest that the behaviour of poor households and communities with respect to the environment tends to be more complex. Access to markets, as well as the quality and condition of the surrounding environment upon which livelihoods are derived, influence the range of choices and trade-offs available to the poor, affecting their behaviour (Gray and Moseley 2005, Barbier 2010). Particularly, Barbier (2010) argues that the poverty–environment interface encompasses more complex relationships involving links between lack of assets, lack of income opportunities, or lack of access to key markets for land, labour, credit, goods and services and the availability and quality of natural resources (including land) to exploit. Similar points were also made previously that "[a]n assets-orientation is particularly important while examining poverty-environment interactions" (UNDP 1999: 26).

Thus, the formulation of links between poverty and the environment cannot be approached in such simplistic connections. Rather, the perspective of poverty–environment interactions embraces a multitude of social institutions (e.g., land tenure systems), issues of resource access and vulnerability contexts (Gray and Moseley 2005). Particularly, land tenure systems draw key concerns in an effort to examine land degradation. The security of land tenure is deemed necessary to encourage investment in conservation by which – in the absence of secure tenure – farmers may not be willing to invest in conservation (Bassett 1993).[12] Accordingly, it appears obvious that "a failure to examine rigorously and empirically the poverty-environment connection may mean that development theorists and planners are, at a minimum, inappropriately scapegoating the poor for problems they have not created, or worse, continuing to promote policies that undermine long-term poverty alleviation, food security and environmental integrity" (Gray and Moseley 2005: 10).

In fact, discussions on the notion of a relationship between land tenure and resource degradation is longstanding, dating back to the 1950s. Some important earlier works by Gordon (1954), Hardin (1968), Ehrlich (1968) and Myers (1979) can be cited as classic examples. These writings were a warning bell about future environmental catastrophes in most developing

countries. These and other similar works tried to attribute a range of environmental degradations observed in developing countries to the overuse and mismanagement of resources by the local populations (Neumann 2005).

Since the 1970s, there has been growing interest among different actors to understand the underlying factors causing land degradation (Olson et al. 2004). What is important here is the need for robust empirical and analytical approaches that would help to capture the diverse biophysical and socio-economic processes affecting changes in land-use, which possibly lead to land degradation. According to Olson et al. (2004), what was often too simplistically approached and analyzed were particularly the socio-economic processes behind land degradation.

Political ecology emerged as a response to the growing need for new approaches that integrate social, economic, political and ecological processes in order to have a comprehensive understanding of environmental degradation. Previously, two distinct contending perspectives (Neo-Malthusian and Boserupian) placed emphasis on population as a central variable in their analysis. On the one hand, Neo-Malthusians argued that high population growth causes and exacerbates environmental problems (e.g., Hardin 1968, Cleaver and Schreiber 1994). On the other hand, the Boserupian position reflected a different view on the population-environment relationships. High population growth leads to agricultural intensification and hence results in better land conservation practices and decreased poverty levels (Boserup 1965, Tiffen et al. 1994, Turner et al. 1993). Political ecologists, however, reject the emphasis given by both neo-Malthusians and Boserupians to population as a single determining variable. Rather, focus was given to the role of political economy, power and history in shaping society-environment interactions and access to and control over resources; and population, therefore, considered one of many factors that influence environmental conditions. Pertinent issues of political economy such as the distribution of wealth, social patterns of accumulation, class relations, the role of the state, patterns of landownership and access to natural resources, are assessed to examine the complex social, economic and political relations in which environmental degradations and agrarian change occur (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987, Batterbury and Bebbington 1999, Gray and Moseley 2005, Olson et al. 2004, Neumann 2005).[13]

Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) defined political ecology as a concept that combines "the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy. Together they encompass the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources, and also within classes and groups within society itself" (ibid.: 17).[14] As an interdisciplinary field, it helps to better understand the underlying societal factors leading to land degradation and also broadly illuminates the socio-economic and political contexts under which agrarian changes take place. Olson et al. (2004) noted the contributions of political ecology emphasizing its explicit focus on considering important aspects that have implications in influencing land-use patterns and land distributions among different groups. Some of the important aspects include policy issues and power dynamics, as well as other socio-economic factors.

In their book titled *Land degradation and Society*, Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) stressed how the dynamics of local land degradations are structured by inequitable social relations. These social relations are especially attributed to the actions of local land-users linked to wider forces of local, regional and global political economy (political economic relationships) realized through 'chains of explanations'. In an earlier work, Blaikie (1985) suggested critical questions and theoretical concepts for understanding the causes of environmental degradation in developing countries. These serve as a springboard for examining the links between environmental degradation and political and economic structures and processes. They suggest two essential sets of processes that have to be brought together and analytically integrated: the physical system and the social/economic system. The first one is typically 'a place-based' or 'location-specific' (ibid.: 80) element focused on the physical manifestation of degradation, which helps us explore the underlying physical processes and their spatial variability and interaction on the one hand, and immediate causal factors including slope, vegetation cover, land use, and rainfall intensity, on the other. Second, the analysis also examines 'non-place-based' or 'non-location specific' (ibid.: 81) elements of economic social and political relations of production, under which land is used affecting decisions of land users directly or indirectly. At the core of the 'non-place-based' analysis is a focus on relations between people and on the nature of state policies, described as follows:

> Land-users are taxed, sell their produce in the market, work for or employ others, have unequal access to land or other agricultural inputs and are part

> of the processes of agrarian change such as commercialization, accumulation, disinvestment and differentiation. Many of these relations directly or indirectly affect land-using decisions, which lead to environmental degradation. It is these processes which are amenable to the analysis of political economy, and involve the objective identification of different economic interests in the countryside as well as the town (ibid.: 81).

This theoretical analysis, drawing from earlier authors (Deere and de Janvry 1979, Bernstein 1977, 1979), possibly explains the cause of land degradation based on assumptions of 'surplus extraction' from peasantries and pastoralists through the social relations of production and exchange (through terms of trade unfavorable to the peasantry). Under such theoretical underpinning, surplus is extracted from the peasantry both at the point of production – when the peasants are relegated to work as wage labourers (social relations of production) – and in the sphere of exchange. This latter moment captures the deteriorating terms of trade for the peasantries – for example, due to the presence of monopolistic merchants buying agricultural produces at cheaper prices. Such peasantries in turn are forced to extract surpluses from the environment (soil, forest resources, pastures, so on), which through time under certain physical conditions leads to degradation (Blaikie 1985). It was from these standpoints that Neumann (2005: 31) describes the central theme of Blaikie's analysis as "if one wants to understand the underlying causes of environmental degradation, one must understand the underlying causes of poverty and if one wants to understand the causes of poverty, one needs a theory of political economy."

A key concern of political ecology, therefore, has been focused on analyzing the ways by which access to land has been influenced by the structure of property rights at various levels – such as at the state, community and household levels (Neumann 2005). It places particular emphasis on key aspects such as "how property rights are defined, negotiated and struggled over among different social groups, be they class, gender or ethnic groupings, and how this helps to explain patterns of development and environmental conservation and degradation" (ibid.: 102). In addition, in order to understand issues of inclusion and exclusion from the whole process, political ecology poses a critical question of 'who controls access' to resources. Moreover, it is also concerned with teasing out particular activities (e.g., tree planting, terracing, and so on) undertaken to strengthen the security of land tenure/constrain access for certain individuals or groups

and of course as a strategy to shift the meaning, control and ownership questions (e.g., Sjaastad and Bromley 1997, Gray 2003).

In their study of land degradation, Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) also introduced the importance of scale within the political ecology approach, to examine the chain of causality at various hierarchies, as environmental degradation and access to resources are not evenly distributed across space. Hence, scale is important to make connections between processes occurring at different scales (local, national, regional and global) and how this can influence interactions and resource access. Note that the essence of scale is not only conceived in spatial terms but in its temporal dimension as well. This temporal dimension of scale is important for examining the social causes of degradation in retrospect. In political ecology, interconnections between processes have been recognized such that, for example, issues of impoverishment and wealth accumulation, environmental degradation and conservation, and urban development and rural crisis are interlinked processes that are operating across different scales ranging from the local to the global level (Neumann 2005: 117).

Political ecology greatly contributes towards a better understanding of recent changes in structure of economy-nature relations. As the issues of environmental and climate change have become more intense and urgent in recent years, the values and practices involving environment, nature and conservation are being reconfigured and claimed in new ways. Nature is being commodified and appropriated by a wide range of actors for various uses (Fairhead et al. 2012, Corson and MacDonald 2012). It is argued that neoliberalism, environmental change, and environmental politics are connected (Heynen and Robbins 2005, Arsel and Büscher 2012, Brockington and Duffy 2010). Conservation is now incorporated as an integral component of capital accumulation on a global scale (Fairhead et al. 2012, Arsel and Büscher 2012, Büscher and Fletcher 2015). The interconnections between global environmental and economic crises have been leading towards accumulation by some and dispossession by others. For example, the enclosure of communal lands or resources for conservation purposes may lead to private benefit, and widen the conditions under which capitalist production can expand (Kelly 2011, Corson and MacDonald 2012). As Kelly (2011: 695) argues "the means by which protected areas are created, maintained and commodified may actually lead to increased environmental degradation through lost rights and land". Increasingly, through the discourses of environmental degradation that put the blame on local

farming and land use practices, rural people in many places have been left in pervasive conditions of vulnerability as their land resources are appropriated by others for national or global environmental ends. A nuanced analysis of the 'chain of causality' (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987) behind local environmental degradation needs to include relationships and processes at different social, political-economic and ecological scales.

A political ecology perspective to land-related conflicts often focuses on political, social and ecological factors, rather than simplistic causal links between population growth, population pressure and land conflicts associated with scarcity narratives. It views access to land as contested – shaped not only by social, historical, and political factors but by the meanings attached to it (Moore 1993, Turner 2004, Benjaminsen et al. 2009). As opposed to the scarcity narrative, political ecology stresses local politics over access to land, land tenure, shifts in political economy and social relations around land.

In order to appreciate the role of land tenure and tenure insecurity, it is important to look into the common classifications. At its core, the concept of tenure encompasses not only the idea of ownership and a corresponding 'bundle of rights', to perform certain activities with the property (Bruce and Fortmann 1988), but also the 'bundle of powers' that affect people's ability to benefit from resources (Ribot and Peluso 2003). Four types of ownership can be identified in a commonly used classification of tenure systems: open access, communal, private and state ownership regimes. Four categories of rights can be identified: use, transfer, exclusion and enforcement. Under the open access type, specific rights are not assigned to anyone and are hence open to everyone. The absence of explicit right to someone implies a lack of incentive for conservation, which often results in resource degradation. In the case of communal ownership, exclusive rights are assigned to a group of individuals, such that any member of a community may have the rights to use the resources of the community. Rights are assigned to an individual under private ownership, according to which other members of the community may be excluded from using the resources. Finally, the rights to the management of land are vested in the public sector in the case of state ownership (Feder and Feeny 1991). Note that there is a clear difference between open access and communal ownership, and treating them as one and the same leads to erroneous conclusions.[15]

In political ecology, therefore, concepts of political economy – including key questions about the distribution of wealth, social patterns of accumulation, and the role of the state to control access to land and resources – can be employed to explain the causes of environmental degradation. This is done under the assumption that social and political factors lie at the heart of environmental problems for which the political ecology approach provides a theoretical foundation (Neumann 2005). Of particular interest to this study, key concepts of political ecology, or 'the political economy of human-environment interactions' are combined with the two perspectives discussed earlier. This is done to examine how land degradation and rural livelihoods are related to land tenure and property rights, which in turn helps us examine how access to land and resources is controlled. In this study, nonetheless, careful notes will also be taken over the main issues upon which political ecology has been criticized in its analysis of environmental degradation. Some of the criticism of relevance to this study includes the overemphasis of political economy while downplaying the role of environmental variables (Stonich 1993, Scoones 1999, Zimmerer 1996, Vayda and Walters 1999, Walker 2005)[16], household survival strategies, conflicts within and among households (inter and intra-household) over access to natural resources, cultural factors, and local resistance (Stonich 1993).

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

The dissertation comprises nine chapters. Chapter Two discusses the research methodology. This includes the research design, the sampling procedure, data collection, and method of analysis. Chapter Three presents the theoretical framework developed through a review of extensive materials mainly related to rural poverty and livelihoods. In doing so, the chapter includes discussions on a wider scale to look at pertinent literature from many sub-Saharan African countries, and beyond that, have some resonance to better understand and relate the Ethiopian case to the wider literature. The literature, unsurprisingly, shows that rural poverty has been pervasive throughout sub-Saharan Africa; its causes are numerous and have continued to emerge and transform over time. It shows that ensuring food security remains one of the major challenges of many countries in the region. The chapter underscores the importance of smallholder farming to overall growth and poverty reduction. It also argues that growing

trends of land acquisitions for large-scale corporate agriculture poses apparent threats to the future of peasants and smallholders, as they are the ones at risk of losing their land and hence, this may have far-reaching consequences for their livelihoods.

The remaining chapters of the dissertation are organized in three parts. Part I, which includes Chapter Four to Chapter Six, is dedicated to the case study of the South Gondar zone in the Amhara region, which analyses the complexity and dynamics of land access, land conflicts and livelihoods. Chapter Four analyses the distribution of landholdings and the means through which land is accessed in the study areas. The chapter also sets out to examine alternative livelihood activities, particularly the link between land access and seasonal migration. It draws particular attention to the evolving dynamics of access to land and the related challenges associated with the rural youth. In doing so, the chapter focuses on how the politics of land access shape and are shaped by social forces and political economic structures and processes, as well as by local ecological dynamics.

Chapter Five proceeds to examine the dynamics of land-related conflict in the study areas. It provides an analysis of the perception of land tenure security and the nature of land conflicts by contextualizing the analysis within the political economy of local governance and land administration processes. It focuses on political economic, social and ecological contexts, which create land conflicts. The chapter examines the effects of important factors, which together have been intensifying competition over access to land in the study areas.

Chapter Six analyzes the local perspectives on the dynamics of land degradation in these study areas. It is based on farmers' own perceptions, particularly their understanding and interpretation of land degradation and its causes, and contextualizes farmers' views and experiences within their specific socio-economic, political and ecological contexts under which degradation takes place. The chapter also explores local soil fertility management practices.

Part II, which includes Chapters Seven and Eight, is dedicated to the case study of the Benishangul-Gumuz region, which focuses on issues related to recent ongoing large-scale land acquisitions. Chapter Seven examines the politics and implications of large-scale land acquisitions for local communities by exploring the trends and contradictions of the land acquisition processes.

Chapter Eight examines the perceptions of local indigenous communities regarding the ongoing large-scale land acquisitions, and how these communities, with a particular focus on the Gumuz people, have been reacting to them.

Part III, which includes Chapter Nine, looks back at the research questions raised in this study in order to highlight the findings and conclude. In this way, it presents a synthesis of the research results and highlights key findings. Finally, it draws the most important conclusions and reflects on the implications of the study.

Notes

[1] Although agriculture or natural resource based activities remain the dominant source of livelihoods, various studies indicate that rural households have been increasingly diversifying their livelihoods and activities in rural sub-Saharan Africa (Bryceson 2002a, 2000a; Ellis 2000, 2006; De Haan and Zoomers 2005).

[2] This is even more so in the case of indigenous communities.

[3] Gross national income (GNI) per capita, Atlas method.

[4] In 2009/10, the number of food insecure rural people was 7.1 million (MoFED 2010: 10); during the fiscal year 2010/11, a total of 7,748,305 people were beneficiaries of the productive safety net program that targets food insecure areas (MoFED 2012: 34).

[5] There are five tiers of government administration in the country, which include (from the highest to lowest administrative unit): federal, region, zone, *woreda* and *kebele*. A *woreda* is roughly equivalent to district while a *kebele*, especially in rural areas, corresponds to a group of villages.

[6] A complex mix of tenure systems (including communal, church, state and private ownership) existed during the imperial period (Rahmato 1984, Mengisteab 1990). As Chole (2004: 90) notes, during this period, peasants were subject to these complex and diversified land tenure systems that were "the breeding ground for many social and economic ills".

[7] The redistribution of land and the formation of peasant associations were regarded as the most important changes brought by the 1974 revolution (Mengisteab 1990).

[8] Recurrent drought shocks, causing severe harvest failure and loss of livestock, have adverse impacts on immediate consumption as well as long-lasting effects (poverty persistence) on household livelihoods (e.g., see Dercon 2004).

[9] For a discussion of the key issues regarding the 'tensions, ambiguities and challenges' of the livelihoods perspectives, as well as the opportunities to enrich the perspectives, see Scoones (2009).

[10] As argued by Scoones (2009), it is important to integrate political economy concerns with the livelihoods perspectives. As already noted, Bernstein (2010: 22-24) point out the basic questions of political economy that concern the understanding of agrarian change: who owns what, who does what, who gets what and what do they do with it? Also see Bernstein et al. 1992.

[11] See Blaikie (1985), Blaikie and Brookfield (1987), Olson *et al.* (2004)

[12] Note that 'causality' could run in both directions.

[13] Over the past three decades, dozens of scholars (e.g., Blaikie and Brookfield 1987, Bassett 1988, Neumann 1992, Peluso 1992, Moore 1993, Batterbury and Bebbington 1999, Peet and Watts 2004, Zimmerer and Bassett 2003, Turner 2004, Benjaminsen *et al.* 2009) have employed political ecology as an explanatory framework to understand resource access by different groups, the structures and institutions that govern access and how they are linked to environmental changes in contemporary and historical contexts.

[14] Several definitions of political ecology can be found varying in terms of its emphasis. Some definitions place particular stress on political economy while others put more emphasis on formal political institutions; some place explicit focus on environmental change as the most important, while others tend to stress narratives about that change (Robbins 2004). Nonetheless, some caution that "political ecology is not, nor should it be, narrowly defined as exclusively concerned with rural, land-based resource issues in developing countries" (Neumann 2005: 116).

[15] Since the time of the "tragedy of the commons", open access property regimes have been often confused with common property regimes though greatly different (Bromley 1991).

[16] Vayda and Walters (1999: 169) argued that "the practice of many political ecologists, presumably regarding access to resources as always politically determined and as always important for understanding or explaining environmental change" resulted in prejudging the importance of political forces in their research activities and hence engaged only with politics while the environment itself is treated marginally i.e., simply "politics without ecology" (p. 168).

2 Methodology and Data Collection

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a description of the study areas and research methods employed in the Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz regions, sequentially. It begins with a description of the Amhara region's study areas, namely the Tach Gayint and Fogera *woredas*, then proceeding to the research methods used in these study areas. Following this, the study area as well as the research methods employed in the Benishangul-Gumuz region is similarly presented.

2.2 The Amhara region study areas

One of the main focal regions of the study is the Amhara regional state, which is also one of the major regions of the country. The 2007 national census estimated the population of the region at 17,214,056 (CSA 2008). The region is divided into ten administrative zones and the fieldwork was carried out in the south Gondar administrative zone between April 2012 and February 2013. During this period, a household survey, interviews, group discussions, and archival research were carried out to collect data. The two case study *woredas* – Tach Gayint and Fogera – were chosen to represent differing socio-economic and agroecological contexts (Map 2.1). These two *woredas* feature differing food security situations, agronomic potentials and livelihood patterns, as well as different incidences of land-related conflicts. After introducing the study areas, the subsequent sections will present the research methods used and the fieldwork processes followed during the field investigation.

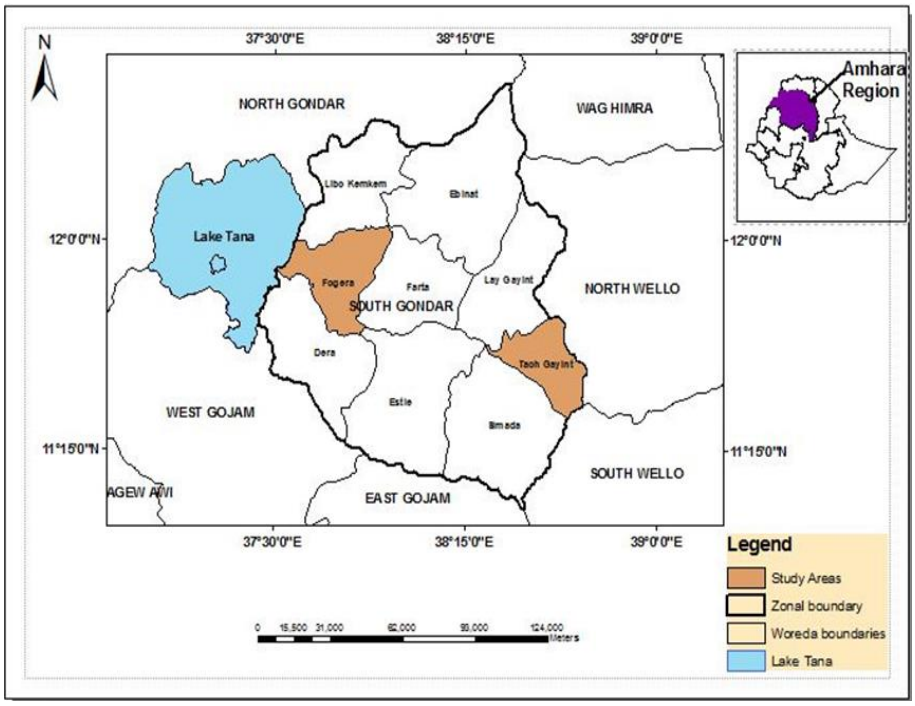
The Tach Gayint *woreda* is geographically located between 11°23' and 11°44' northern latitudes, and 38°20' and 38°44' eastern longitudes. The *woreda* covers an estimated area of 995 km^2 in the eastern part of the south

Gondar administrative zone and has a population of 101,930 (CSA 2008). Its population density is about 102 inhabitants per km^2. It shares borders with three other *woredas* of the south Gondar Zone (Este, Simada and Lay Gayint *woredas,* and two districts of the north Wollo and south Wollo Zones) (Figure 1). Most areas of the *woreda* have an altitude of more than 2,000 meters above sea level; the altitude generally tends to decrease as one moves away from the northern part of the *woreda* (SERA project report 2000). The topography of the *woreda* consists of 20% mountainous lands, 12% plains, 40% gorges and valleys, and 28% rugged terrains. In terms of agro-ecological conditions, it is classified into *dega* (16.1%), *woina-dega* (46.45%) and *kolla* (37.45%).[1] Annual rainfall of the *woreda* ranges from 800 mm to 1,000 mm (Tach Gayint *woreda* office of Agriculture 2012). The soil characteristic of the *woreda* is generally less fertile and intensively cultivated and more vulnerable to soil erosion because of the rugged nature of the topography.

Fogera *woreda* is situated between 11°46' and 11°59' northern latitudes, and 37°33' and 37°52' eastern longitudes. According to the 2007 national census, the total population of the *woreda* was 226,595, out of which the rural population was estimated to be 201,411 (CSA 2008). The *woreda* covers an estimated land size of 108,030 hectares. Flat plains dominate its topography (76%), followed by valley bottoms (13%) and mountainous and hilly areas (11%). In terms of agro-ecological characteristics, the *woreda* is predominantly classified as *woina-dega*. Its altitude ranges from 1,774 metres to 2,410 metres above sea level.

Averaging of 1,216 mm, the annual rainfall of the *woreda* ranges from 1,103 mm to 1,336 mm (Gebey et al. 2012). The rain falls bimodally: a short rainy season (March–April) and a long one (June–September). The dominant soil types that characterize the Fogera plain are black clay soils (vertisols), while luvisols dominate the mid and high altitude areas (IPMS 2005, LIU/DMFSS 2008, Gebey et al. 2012). The Fogera plain is a seasonally flooded area bordering Lake Tana and two major rivers (Gumara and Reb). These three water sources cause the flooding of the plain during the main rainy season. These rivers carry fertile soils to the Fogera plain from surrounding mid and highland areas located on its eastern part. The seasonally flooded plains have been used for rice cultivation since the 1990s. Farmers focusing on cultivating vegetables, particularly onion and tomatoes during the dry season, now irrigate through the Gumara and Reb rivers.

Map 2.1
Map of the south Gondar administrative zone
(showing the location of study woredas/districts)

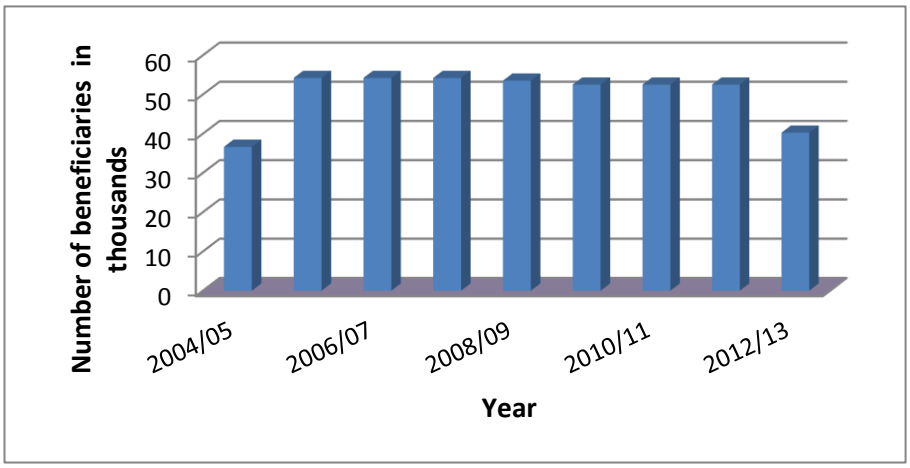


Note: This map was made by Abel Markos, a colleague in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Gondar (Ethiopia).

In both of the study areas, Tach Gayint and Fogera, a mixed-farming system of crop farming and livestock rearing is commonly practiced. A diversified range of crops is intensively cultivated in each of the study areas. In Tach Gayint, the main cereal crops include sorghum, teff, wheat, barley, maize and millet, while rice, maize, millet and teff represent the dominant cereals cultivated in Fogera. Nonetheless, Tach Gayint is a food insecure *woreda,* where crop production is mainly for self-consumption far more than for market sale, whereas Fogera is a food surplus producing area. So far, food security has been the unattained objective of most of the households in Tach Gayint. Being one of the chronically food insecure *woredas*, many of the households are, in fact, deficit producers, households worrying about not being able to feed themselves for the entire year. For

this reason, the *woreda* has been under the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) since 2005 that aims at improving the income and livelihood status of food insecure households (Figure 2.1). Drought is common in the area, and has occurred more frequently since the 1960s. Generally, Tach Gayint has had a long history of dependence on food aid, even long before the PSNP was implemented.

Figure 2.1
Number of PSNP beneficiaries in the Tach Gayint woreda



Source: Own illustration from Tach Gayint *woreda* office of Agriculture (2012).

In contrast, Fogera is food secure and is actually one of the wealthier *woredas* in the region. Until recently, the Fogera plain was largely known as a grazing ground for livestock. Because of the recurring severe seasonal floods, crop production was limited and the cereals grown in the *woreda* were mainly cultivated in the mid and highland areas bordering the plains. During the rainy season, the Gumara and Reb rivers and Lake Tana overflow their banks, affecting a significant proportion of the Fogera Plain. The water stays during the rainy season making cultivation of the plain difficult, but farmers try to cultivate once the water starts to recede. People on the seasonally flooded plain move with their livestock to nearby mid- and highland *kebeles* until the water recedes back. The Plain was also used

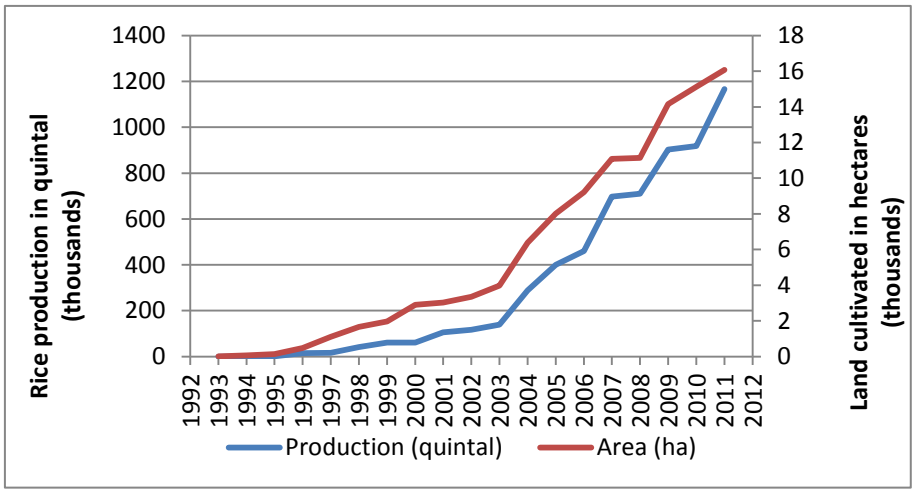
as a dry season grazing area for livestock coming from neighboring Dera and Libo Kemkem *woredas* as well (Map 2.1).

Over the past two decades, rice emerged as the most important crop cultivated on the Fogera plain, accompanied by the expansion of small-scale irrigation for the cultivation of horticultural crops during the dry season. Double cropping soon became widespread: rice is cultivated during the rainy (*kremt*) season from June to September, and later leguminous crops are planted using the residual moisture after the rice is harvested. For instance, in the study *kebeles* of Fogera (Shina and Aboa-Kokit), rice was cultivated in June and harvested in November; the same land was then sown with vetch (*guaya*) after harvesting the rice. Once vetch is harvested, the land is then ploughed and its soil is overturned for planting onion or tomatoes, usually using irrigation. In this way, farmers have been able to produce marketable surplus above their subsistence needs. This trend has raised incomes; farmers of Fogera are now among the wealthiest rural dwellers in the Amhara region. The *woreda* in general is one of the major rice-growing areas in the country. It is in this period (since 1990s) that a large part of the plain has been brought under rice cultivation, even at the expense of grazing fields for livestock. Until recently, the Fogera plain had been known for its livestock production, particularly of the Fogera breeds. This major change in land use in the area (since the introduction of rice and double cropping patterns) appears to have resulted in land shortages and land conflicts (Chapter 5). An important issue that can be attributed to the expansion of rice and double cropping in the area is the decline in out-migration of individuals and households to various areas (Chapter 4). As farmers adapt their land use system to local ecological conditions, and as they respond to market opportunities through the cultivation of rice on the seasonally flooded plains, labour becomes highly applied. This in turn leads to the reducing out-migration in the area. Out-migration, both temporary and permanent, had been the main feature of people in the Fogera plain until two decades ago.

Although rice was first introduced into the Fogera plain in early 1980s, farmers only started its cultivation in the 1990s, after the change in the country's regime. In 1993, there were only 30 households in two *kebeles* who had planted rice over an area of 6 hectares (IPMS 2005, Gebey et al. 2012). However, this was subsequently expanded over many *kebeles,* large areas of grazing land having been brought into rice cultivation. During the first few years of rice being introduced to the area, its promotion was met

with considerable resistance due to the widespread negative perceptions about the crop amongst farmers - such as the belief that rice causes sexual impotence and infertility. These perceptions subsequently changed through extensive agricultural extension efforts. Gradually, farmers showed an increasing interest in rice cultivation, in response to the suitability of the soil for it and the growing markets for the crop. While initially the entire production was meant for the market, farmers later began to consume rice by preparing *injera*, bread and local drinks such as *tela*. Over the past decade, for instance, the total area under rice went from 6 hectares, producing 160 quintals in 1993, to 16,070 hectares producing 1,166,473 quintals in 2011 (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2
Trends in rice production in the Fogera woreda, 1993 - 2011



Source: Own illustration based on data provided by the Fogera *woreda* Office of Agriculture (2012).

Households in both study areas use oxen-ploughs for ploughing fields; thus, the ownership of oxen has always been central to the traditional farming practices in each of the study areas. Strikingly, despite the importance of oxen for land preparation – a practice requiring two oxen – a large number of households in the Tach Gayint *woreda* (39.9%) do not own

even a single ox (Table 2.1).[2] In contrast, only 8.6% of the households in Fogera owned no oxen. Those households with only one ox were 37.3% and 44% in the Tach Gayint and Fogera *woredas*, respectively. As shown in Table 2.1, only 24% of the households in Tach Gayint owned a pair of oxen or more, as compared to a significant number (47%) in Fogera.[3] These suggest that the Tach Gayint *woreda* is clearly an area of ox scarcity. This is not surprising given the fact that Tach Gayint has generally been facing a shortage of pasture and livestock feed due to land shortages and recurring droughts. However, given the important role of access to oxen, a variety of local institutional arrangements existed through which non-owners as well as those with only one ox were able to access or share this vital resource. Those households with no oxen at all usually borrow or hire from relatives, friends or neighbours; some also exchanged their labour for the use of oxen, by ploughing the fields of the oxen owners. Households with only one ox mostly team up with similar households and use the paired oxen to plough their fields rotationally.

Table 2.1
Oxen ownership in the study areas

Oxen ownership	Number of households (HHs) owning oxen			
	Tach Gayint		Fogera	
	No. of HHs	%	No. of HHs	%
No oxen	9,850	39.9	3,565	8.6
One ox	9,211	37.3	18,295	44.0
Two oxen	5,111	20.7	17,879	43.0
Three & above	824	3.3	1,841	4.4
Total	24,696	100	41,582	100

Source: Own illustration based on data provided by the Fogera *woreda* and Tach Gayint *woreda* Office of Agriculture (2012).

2.2.1 Research methods: a mixed approach

This study combines both qualitative research methods and quantitative household survey methods for the sake of understanding and examining the livelihoods of rural households. The mixed approach that was used in this research employs strategies of inquiry that involve collecting qualitative and quantitative data sequentially to best understand the research

problem under investigation. Though the strategies of data inquiry are quite different, the final database represents both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell 2003, Sharp 2007). The use of a mixed research method is partly aimed at overcoming the limitations of one method through the other. Moreover, it allows a comprehensive understanding of the complex social world (Tolossa 2005b). The application of multiple methods, both qualitative and quantitative, strengthens a given study as the findings of one method may be corroborated by the findings obtained by the other. Moreover, particularly complex social phenomena have various dimensions and linkages in which they are best understood via a range of diverse methods (Creswell et al. 2003, Sharp 2007). Scoones (1995: 67) for instance, questioned the conventional assumption that sample surveys will always provide better data results, and argued that qualitative wealth ranking methods and household survey approaches can be employed in tandem to better understanding wealth and differentiation – and thus, the dynamics of rural poverty. In support of this, Kandiyoti (1999: 521) stated that "survey data is valuable only to the extent that it builds upon a solid bedrock of in-depth, qualitative information about the processes under investigation."

Temu and Due (2000) also provided evidence that conventional surveys and qualitative participatory approaches could be combined for better insights and understandings than would be the case if each method were carried out independently. For studies to be conducted in most sub-Saharan Africa countries, they recommended that researchers need to refrain from solely relying on conventional sample surveys and be eclectic in using and adopting 'methodological pluralism' to gain better insights. In a research report in Malawi, Leach and Kamangira (1997) also demonstrated the benefits gained through combining the two methods. They contended that a combination of techniques enabled them to access a range of information that would not have been possible without the combination of techniques. In poverty studies, 'reliance on either only the quantitative approach or only the qualitative approach is often likely to be less desirable' than using them in combination, as each approach has inherent limitations when used independently (Carvalho and White 1997: 3). A quantitative approach is, for example, more likely to miss important issues that cannot be easily quantifiable, leading to a tendency to downplay or disregard these issues as irrelevant. It may also fall short of capturing intra-household dynamics, especially when the household head answers

questions on behalf of the household, thus ignoring the relations within a household. On the other hand, qualitative data features limitations when trying to generalize results beyond the specific research area. Moreover, the subjectivity of the data collection and analysis processes makes qualitative data less verifiable.

White (2002) also stated the need for combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in poverty analysis by using examples from studies of labour in rural Africa. After outlining several areas of analysis where insights from qualitative methods could feed the development of quantitative analysis, White (2002) argued that there is no reason to give primacy to one method over the other, as both techniques have their place in social analysis. Hence, a combination of techniques will frequently yield greater insights than each one used in isolation (ibid.). In a study on destitution in the Northeastern highlands of Ethiopia, Devereux et al. (2003: 34) also integrated qualitative and quantitative research methods as the best way to capture the complex dynamics of destitution in the area.

While the purpose and focus of a given research matters, Tolossa (2005a) argued that food security at the household level can be best examined through a mixed research design. This is because food security and poverty have multiple dimensions that cannot be handled easily through a single method.

More studies have been conducted based on mixed methods for the sake of gaining greater results in understanding and explaining livelihoods and poverty. Some of these include Ellis and Freeman (2004), Ege and Aspen (2003), Barrett (2004), Howe and Mckay (2004), Tolossa (2005a), and Devereux et al. (2003).

Carvalho and White (1997: 17-18) provide good ways of combining both approaches in terms of "integrating the quantitative and qualitative methodologies; examining, explaining, confirming, refuting, and/or enriching information from one approach with that from the other; and merging the findings from the two approaches into one set of policy recommendations." Ellis (2000: 198) has also contributed to the 'combined methods' debate by arguing that neither sample surveys nor participatory methods, when used separately, can provide a complete approach to achieve a better understanding of rural livelihoods. He suggested the combination of the two approaches as each of them play different roles and

render different insights – in a complementary fashion – within the framework of a given research design. In sum, the overall objective of mixed methods is:

> [To] tap the *breadth* of the quantitative approach and the *depth* of qualitative approach. The exact combination of qualitative and quantitative work will depend on the purpose of the study and the available time, skills, and resources. In general, integrating methodologies can result in *better measurement*; confirming, refuting, enriching and explaining can result in *better analysis*; and merging the …findings into one set of policy recommendations can lead to *better action* (Carvalho and White 1997: 18).

Based on these arguments, the present study uses mixed methods in order to reap the synergies of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Accordingly, the methodology used in the study areas of the Amhara region combined a survey (using a closed questionnaire) and various qualitative methods, which provided the opportunity to obtain adequate data on the main issues of land and rural livelihoods investigated in this study. The following section introduces the various methods employed during the fieldwork in the Tach Gayint and Fogera study areas.

Household survey

As the sampling procedure represents a critical part of the research design, a sampling frame that constituted all *kebeles* in the study areas was used for making decisions on the selection of household survey sites. In order to ensure a good representation of major ecological and socio-economic variability in the region, a stratified multi-stage random sampling approach was used. As a first step in stratifying *kebeles*, livelihood zone maps (supplied by the South Gondar Zonal Department of Agriculture) were used to select *kebeles* from each livelihood zone using a lottery method.[4] It is important to note that livelihood zone maps were used deliberately, since, given the objective of this study, they delineate areas within which people follow broadly similar patterns of livelihood. Livelihood patterns are actually affected by multiple factors that are taken into account in livelihood zoning, which includes geographical contexts (e.g., climate, topography, soil, vegetation and other agro-ecological factors, and those related to infrastructure development), cropping patterns and production systems, and markets/trade interactions. This ensures that households from different livelihood patterns are represented in the study, providing the opportunity

for valid comparisons between livelihood zones. In addition, since livelihood zones may cut across multiple administrative boundaries, there is a high chance for the research findings to represent large areas falling within the same livelihood zones. Owing to such reasons, livelihood zone maps were preferred over mere agro-ecological zone maps – which simply reveal what households can grow or produce in a given agro-ecological context, rather than showing what they actually do. From this perspective, the study *woredas*, Tach Gayint and Fogera, fall in different livelihood zones; Tach Gayint is further divided into two zones, as described below.

1. Tach Gayint woreda

The Tach Gayint *woreda* is divided into two main livelihood zones: (a) the Abay-Tekeze Watershed (ATW) livelihood zone and (b) the Abay-Beshilo Basin (ABB) livelihood zone. The ATW livelihood zone extends from north Wollo administrative zone to the southeastern part of the south Gondar, encompassing eight *kebeles* of the Tach Gayint *woreda*. These *kebeles* are: Agatt, Aketo, Bete Yohanes, Kutemender, Enjit, Eskenderawit, Gomengay and Jaje. The zone has a mostly rugged topography with eroded hilly terrain dissected by several valleys (SERA project report 2000, LIU/DMFSS 2008). Agro-ecologically, it is mainly a *Woina dega* (mid altitude) area, with some areas of *Dega* (highland) and *Kola* (lowlands). Tree species of eucalyptus, *embach* (local name), acacia, Olia africana, *dedeho* (local name), dodenia and Croton macrostacheous form the current scattered tree and shrub vegetation found in the zone. The zone is characterized by an erratic pattern of rainfall with uneven distribution, annual rainfall ranging from 800 mm to 1,500mm. It is a mixed farming zone in which people engage in crop production and animal husbandry simultaneously for their livelihood. Crop farming is entirely rain-fed, relying on the single rainy (*kremt*) season (from June to mid-September). It is this *kremt* rain that is used for the cultivation of both long and short cycle crops in the area. Wheat, barley, teff and highland pulses represent the dominant crops cultivated in the zone, while sheep, cattle and goats are the main livestock types reared. Being a food insecure area that has long depended on food aid, the livelihood zone is under the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP).

The Abay-Beshilo watershed livelihood zone includes the lowland (*kola*) areas in various administrative zones of east and west Gojjam, south Wollo and south Gondar. It also covers seven lowland *kebeles* of the Tach

Gayint *woreda*: Aduka, Anseta, Efrata, Betelihem, Endiwa, Gedoda and Magesa. These *kebeles* are chronically food insecure areas and also have a long history of dependence on food aid. This zone consists of a narrow and elongated area, with bush and shrub vegetation, characterized by erratic rainfall, high temperatures and sandy soils. Similarly, this is a mixed production zone, featuring both crop and livestock production. With a single rainy season, crop farming is entirely rain-fed. It is mainly an area of sorghum, teff and haricot beans. Ownership of livestock is generally considered as the main determinant of wealth in the zone. The dominant livestock are goats. In terms of access to markets, this zone is a remote area at a large distance from major roads and towns. The Productive Safety Net Program covers this zone as well.

In view of that, two *kebeles* from the Abay-Tekeze Watershed livelihood zone and one *kebele* from Abay-Beshilo Basin livelihood zone were selected using a simple lottery method after all the *kebeles* of the *woreda* were listed in their respective livelihood zones. The *kebeles* selected were Enjit and Agatt in the Abay-Tekeze watershed livelihood zone, (which are *woina dega* in agro-ecology) and Anseta from the Abay-Beshilo Basin livelihood zone (which is a lowland *kebele*). After the three sample *kebeles* were selected, the total study sample size for the *woreda* was distributed proportionally based on the total number of households in each selected *kebele*. The three *kebeles* are inhabited by a total of 4,084 households in which the Tach Gayint *woreda* study sample size of 300 households was distributed proportionally to the total household size in each *kebele*. Accordingly, 110 households from the Agatt *kebele*, 105 households from the Enjit *kebele* and the remaining 85 households from the Anseta *kebele* were selected randomly from a list of households in each *kebele*.

2. Fogera woreda

The livelihood zone in which the second study *woreda*, Fogera, is located is the Tana Zuria livelihood zone, which cuts across several districts in both north Gondar and south Gondar administrative zones. This zone mainly consists of plains, with a few isolated mountains. It is characterized by moderate rainfall and relatively fertile clay soils. Moderate population density and settlements also characterize the area (LIU/DMFSS 2008). The dominant tree species is eucalyptus, commonly planted close to homesteads for its economic value. Crop farming mainly depends on rains falling in the June – September period, and small-scale irrigation is also

used for cultivating vegetables. The main crops grown are rice, maize, barley, millet, vetch and chickpea. Out of these, rice, vetch and chickpea are produced as the main cash crops. Farmers have currently begun to harvesting up to three times a year. Due to the good availability of both pastures and water, livestock production represents an important livelihood strategy in the area as well. The area has a relatively good road network that enables market access, and it is food sufficient.

A questionnaire-based survey of 200 households within two *kebeles* of the Fogera *woreda* (which is a representative of Tana Zuria livelihood zone) was carried out in the same period (October-December 2012) as the one carried out in the Tach Gayint *woreda*. The households surveyed were selected through random sampling in each of the *kebeles*. In both sampled *kebeles*, the sampling frame used for random household selection was obtained from local offices. Before drawing the samples, verification work was done in consultation with local officials on whether the list included all households residing in each sampled *kebele* boundaries. Since the sample needed to represent all the households in the *kebele*, lists used by different offices for different purposes were compared as part of the verification. A randomly selected sample size of 200 households was then surveyed, in which 90 households were selected in the Abua Kokit *kebele* and 110 households in the Shina *kebele* (based on the total number of households in the *kebeles)*.

It is important to note that the survey conducted in the Fogera *woreda* was not intended for making a strict comparison with the Tach Gayint *woreda*. The purpose of the questionnaire was to contrast the two areas, as they are very different in many relevant aspects of the topic under study. These aspects include the extent of land degradation, land use and management practices, agro-ecological variability, migration trends, type of crops grown, food security situation, prevalence of land disputes/conflicts, and infrastructure development. Instead, the main focus here was examining the widespread land conflicts.

Implementing the household survey

To effectively execute the household survey, *woreda* Agriculture office staff members with extensive experience and knowledge of the area were consulted regarding the appropriate timing and logistical issues. As a consequence, the household survey was carried out after the main rainy (*kremt*) season, from October to December 2012.

The timing enabled the enumerators to reach all randomly selected sample households through the sampling procedure explained above, and also made the supervision work successful. This would have been difficult and costly during the rainy season as the fieldwork involved travelling within and between villages.

The English-language questionnaire was translated into the local language (Amharic) and then pre-tested to evaluate its relevance and clarity. Twenty enumerators who had work experience in agricultural extension and development activities in the study areas administered the survey. These data collectors were professionals with bachelor's degrees in fields such as agricultural extension, natural resource management, agronomy, and land administration. At the time of the survey, the data collectors worked in the study areas and were selected to enhance household participation and gain the confidence of the local communities. From the beginning, there was an awareness of the possible biases that these local development agents might bring in the research, but efforts were made to minimize this limitation through daily follow-ups and cross-checking of the data collection process. In order to have a common understanding of the contents of the questionnaire, a two-day training session was organized for the data collectors in the district towns of Arb Gebeya (in the Tach Gayint *woreda*) and Wereta (in the Fogera *woreda*), particularly on the objective of the study and how to conduct the questionnaire. During the training, particular emphasis was made on who to interview. Since the survey questions referred the household as a socio-economic unit (not only the household head), the data collectors were particularly advised to make the interview as group interviews: include as many members of the household in the interviews as possible. In addition, one field supervisor for each *kebele* was employed to supervise the survey work, checking the survey responses for completeness, irrelevant responses and errors. The field supervisors were assigned in *kebeles* other than the ones they worked in, to help minimize the possible biases that might have occurred because of the data collectors.

Following the completion of the quantitative survey (of a total of 500 households) in both *woredas* covering five *kebeles*, the data was cleaned and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) for statistical analysis. For understanding the data and to minimize data entry errors, data was entered by the researcher himself.

Table 2.2
Structure of the survey samples in each of the study sites

Woreda	Livelihood zone	Name of selected *kebele*	Total number of households	Sampled households	
Tach Gayint	Abay-Tekeze Watershed	Enjit	1,430	105	300
		Agatt	1,494	110	
	Abay-Beshilo Basin	Anseta	1,160	85	
Fogera	Tana-Zuria	Shina	2,151	110	200
		Abua-kokit	1,047	90	
				Total	500

Sample household characteristics

Using the survey questionnaire, an extensive set of answers to questions (and therefore variables) pertaining to the main objectives of the study was collected. As indicated in Table 2.3, the sampled households featured 84% male-headed and 16% female-headed households in Tach Gayint, and 91.5% male-headed and 8.5% female-headed households in Fogera. The mean age of these household heads was 47.5 years for Tach Gayint, but 41.9 years for those in Fogera. In terms of mean household size, the sampled households in Tach Gayint and Fogera were composed of 5.6 and 5.3 members on average, respectively. In Tach Gayint, almost all of the household heads had been married at one point in their lives, of whom about 84% were married at the time of the survey; the remaining 7.3% and 8% were divorced or widowed, respectively. In Fogera, married household heads constituted 88% of the sample, while the remainder were either divorced or widowed. More than half of the sampled household heads in both of the areas were illiterate, and about 35% in Tach Gayint and 38% in Fogera had minimum literacy (could only read and write) acquired through informal adult education and religious teachings (*yeqes temhert*). Only 8.3% in Tach Gayint and 7.5% in Fogera had formal education, the highest level being secondary school. Ethnically, all of the sampled households in both of the study areas belonged to the Amhara ethnic group. Almost all were orthodox Christians, with only about 2% of the Tach Gayint sample being Muslim.

Table 2.3
Sample households' socioeconomic characteristics

Household characteristics	Study area	
	Tach Gayint	Fogera
Number of sampled households	300	200
Mean age of household head (in years)	47.5 (13.0)	41.9 (13.7)
Mean household size (persons)	5.6	5.3
Gender of household head (%)		
Male-headed	84.3	91.5
Female-headed	15.7	8.5
Educational status of head (%)		
Illiterate	56.3	54.5
Minimum literacy (read and write)	35.3	38.0
Primary education	4.0	6.5
Secondary education	4.3	1.0
Marital status of head (%)		
Single	0.3	-
Married	84.3	88.0
Divorced	7.3	3.5
Widowed	8.0	8.5
Religion of head (%)		
Orthodox Christian	98.3	100
Muslim	1.7	-
Ethnicity (%)		
Amhara	100	100

Note: Figures given in parentheses are standard deviations.

Qualitative data collection

As the research questions required the use of multiple methods, data types, and data sources, the intensive fieldwork also involved the collection of a variety of qualitative data. The qualitative and quantitative data collection was carried out sequentially. The first phase of the qualitative data collection actually preceded the household survey, enabling the design and finalization of the household survey questionnaire. The second phase was implemented after the household survey. The qualitative fieldwork was carried out purposively within each of the five household survey *kebeles*, as well as in some other *kebeles* in both study *woredas* for the purpose of capturing some important issues that would not have been represented in the selected sample *kebeles*. The main types of qualitative methods employed

at individual, household, group and community levels included: key informant interviews, focus group discussions, in-depth household case studies, participatory wealth ranking, and observations.

Key informant interviews were conducted with several selected individuals who were knowledgeable and have a good understanding of the study area. Within each study site, information about community livelihoods was obtained from in-depth interviews with key local informants who were thought to have extensive knowledge and were able to articulate any changes over time in the study areas. Interviews were also conducted with individuals from *woreda*, zonal and regional government and other offices in order to gain an understanding of land and livelihood issues from an official and technical point of view. These included land administration officers, development agents, agricultural experts, judges from *woreda* courts, and government officials.

Group discussions consisting of 8 to 12 people (men and women) from different age and wealth groups were held in each study *kebele*. The discussions were carried out after appointments for group meetings were made with the selected community members. In some study sites, discussions with separate groups of men and women were held in order to enhance the ability and willingness of individual participants, particularly women, to speak on the issues being discussed. Since each of the discussion participants were selected purposively with the assistance of key informants, local government representatives and land committee members were mostly not included in the groups, as their presence in the group might have inhibited open and free discussions.[5] Separate discussions were held by appointment with local land committee members and government representatives. Although semi-structured checklists guided the discussions, some of the points were rephrased in a particular way or more emphasis was put on certain issues depending on specific local issues that came up during the discussions. In order to capture the discussions in their entirety, a voice recorder was used upon the consent of the participants. The information obtained from the discussions was recorded collectively as a group. A total of 12 focus group discussions distributed over the five study *kebeles* were held in both study *woredas*. In this regard, in each of the three study *kebeles* of Tach Gayint, two focus group discussions were held whereas in the case of Fogera, three group discussions were conducted in each of the two *kebeles*. This was due to the high incidence of land related conflicts, which required more group discussions. In addition, group discussions

with members of the various rural committees, including land committee and social courts, were held in each study *kebele*. Although a checklist of the main issues to be covered guided each discussion, participants were also able to influence the focus and direction of the discussions.

The group discussions were mainly focused on issues of access to land and livelihoods. The discussions were open, although guided towards understanding the nature of land distributions and emerging social structures related to the nature of land distribution, collective understandings of local conditions, constraints and problems pertaining to land access, land related conflicts, major environmental changes and patterns of seasonal migration.

For in-depth stories, some individuals (mainly young people) and households were purposively selected within each of the study sites. The case study households were selected carefully with the view of capturing as much diversity as possible regarding rural livelihoods. In the selection of case studies participants, special attention was paid to those individuals and households that had been involved in land conflicts or seasonal migration, to capture a variety of experiences and verify some recurring issues from key informant interviews and group discussions. Thus, the purpose of the case studies was to explore in greater depth some of the main issues raised in group discussions, to gain a deeper understanding of them. The individual case studies indeed provided rich accounts, as this method afforded individuals more opportunities to be open about their personal experiences.

As the study is interested in understanding how different types of households' access resources and differences in livelihood pattern within a community, participatory wealth ranking exercises were conducted in order to categorize households into different wealth groups. In each study *woreda*, the exercise was conducted with a group of key informants who set up their own local criteria to define different categories of wealth. Out of the exercises, four wealth groupings were identified: better off, medium, poor and very poor. Once the wealth criteria for each of the groupings were defined, the next step was to find out what proportion of households in each study *kebele* fell into each group. The key informants involved in the exercise assigned each household into one of the four wealth groups. This exercise helped me to understand the local perceptions of poverty and wealth.

To gain a better picture of the study areas – as well as for practical reasons related to time and costs – the researcher was residing in Arb Gebeya (in the Tach Gayint *woreda*) and Wereta (in the Fogera *woreda*) in order to easily make frequent trips to each study site. Accordingly, this made it possible to make frequent field visits and interact with local communities in their homes, farm fields, farmers' training centers, and community gathering places (e.g., churches, market places, festival places, and public work areas). The field visits were necessary to conduct direct observations of the activities and issues that were the focus of the interviews and discussions held in each of the study sites.

In addition to a variety of primary data collected through the use of qualitative and survey methods, useful secondary data was gathered from several sources as well. Important information extracted and summarized from various government and other offices at different levels include, for example, agricultural data (including eight years' time series data on crop yields and production levels), population data, livestock data, land laws and policies, geographic and environmental characteristics of the area, productive safety net beneficiaries figures, land certificate holders' figures and so on.

Data showing the nature and magnitude of land disputes over the last five years was also compiled at the *woreda* court of both study areas; follow-up discussions were held with local judges so as to understand the data better. Constituting the main part of the archival research, one month was spent sorting out and organizing the land-related court cases documented in the *woreda* courts of both study areas. Though my access to the courts' documentation centers was rare and fortunate, examining and categorizing individual land cases was a time-consuming task, as the cases were archived in a disorganized fashion. Because of this, staff members of the court documentation centers were employed on part-time basis to take on these tasks. That said, court records were actually instrumental in understanding the nature and pattern of land related conflicts, and very helpful in cross-validating data obtained through other methods.

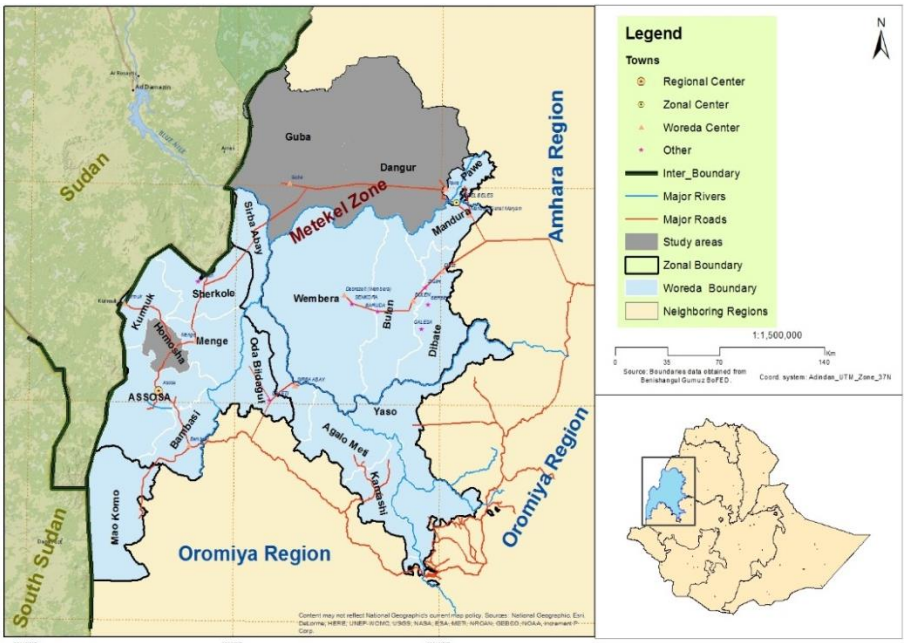
Information regarding criminal cases caused by land disputes recorded at district police stations was similarly accessed, complemented by interviews with chief police inspectors.

2.3 The Benishangul-Gumuz region study area and methods

As mentioned in the introduction, the study included the issue of large-scale land acquisitions in the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state. The Benishangul-Gumuz region, the other region on which this study focuses, is one of the nine administrative regions of the country. This region, which is one of the areas where many of the current large-scale land acquisitions are focused, is located in the northwestern part of the country, sharing an international border with Sudan and South Sudan in the west. In a national setting, the region shares borders with the Amhara and Oromiya regional states (Map 2.2). It occupies an estimated total area of 50,380 km^2 (BGRS 2004), and has a total population of 670,847 (CSA 2008). The population consists of indigenous ethnic minority groups of Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo. It is also inhabited by settlers from other regions, with a diverse ethnic background. Starting in the 1950s, these settlers moved into the area because of 'distress push' migration, mainly from drought-affected areas of the northern part of the country, and later through state-sponsored forced resettlement schemes by the Derg regime. The indigenous groups depend on a customary land tenure system of communal ownership and rely mainly on shifting cultivation for their livelihood. This is supplemented with other subsidiary activities such as hunting, gathering, fishing, livestock raising, traditional alluvial gold mining and honey production.

The region is perceived to have extensive and untapped land resources with a great potential for agricultural development, and has a vast vegetation cover of natural forests, bushes and shrubs. In terms of its land-use pattern, over three quarters (77.4%) of the region's land mass is covered in bushes and shrubs, while forestlands constitute about 11.4% (MoFA 2010). In addition, cultivated land and grazing lands constitute about 5.3% and 3.2%, respectively. Marginal land is estimated at about 2.3% of the total landmass of the region. The region is endowed with streams and rivers that flow throughout the year, with a great potential for irrigation: the Dabus, Dedessa, Beles and Abay (Blue Nile) are the major rivers that flow through it. About 1 million hectares of land in the region is estimated to be potentially irrigable. Agro-ecologically, about 75% of the region is classified as lowland (*kolla*) while 24% and the remaining 1% of the region's area are classified as midland (*Woina dega*) and highlands (*Dega*), respectively (MoFA 2010).

Map 2.2
Map of the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state, Ethiopia
(showing the locations of the studied woredas).



Note: This map was created by Nigussie Abdissa, a colleague who works in the Tana-Beles Integrated Water Resource Development Project, Assosa (Ethiopia), using ArcGIS 10.1 by Esri (© Esri). Sources: Boundaries data were obtained from the Benishangul-Gumuz Bureau of Finance and Economic Development (BoFED).

This region on the borderland, historically "a buffer zone and a trade entrepôt" between Ethiopia and Sudan (Markakis 2011: 84), was incorporated into the Ethiopian empire toward the end of the nineteenth century during the reign of emperor Menelik II (Ahmad 1999; Pankhurst 1977). After this incorporation, its people were made to pay tribute in "slaves, ivory and gold" to the central state (Ahmad 1999: 433). In later periods, especially since the 1950s, the indigenous lowland communities have faced continual acts of encroachment and exploitation by neighbouring highlander communities who were slowly expanding into the lowlands in search of cultivable land (Abbute 2002).

In general, population density in the country is high in the highland areas. The lowland regions remained sparsely inhabited by indigenous people and underdeveloped in terms of basic infrastructure. In addition to decades of gradual encroachments of highlander plough cultivators, the forced resettlement programme of the Derg regime in the 1980s moved tens of thousands of impoverished people from densely populated highland regions to the lowland areas, with predictably adverse consequences for the indigenous local communities (Markakis 2011). Furthermore, beginning in the early 1990s, the indigenous lowland communities have faced additional pressures on their land resources caused by the introduction of private agricultural investment, which was commonly undertaken by investors who were ethnically from the highland regions. More recently, large swathes of land across the region have been offered to both foreign and domestic capital for production of food and agrofuels on an unprecedented scale (see Chapter 7). Much of the land offered for leasing is classified by the state and other elites as "unused" or "underutilised", presumably overlooking the spatially extensive use of land in shifting cultivation and agro-pastoralism, which poses apparent threats to the land rights and livelihoods of indigenous communities in these lowlands (Makki 2014). As a backdrop to this *terra nullius* narrative is the central – and ongoing – role and extraordinary power of the Ethiopian state to determine the allocation and use of all land resources, making it particularly difficult for the weakly organised indigenous communities to negotiate effectively or secure adequate compensation from corporate investors or state actors.

For intensive fieldwork, two *woredas* from the Metekel Zone, namely the Dangur *woreda* and the Guba *woreda*, were purposively selected. In addition, a short visit was made to the Homosha *woreda* of Assosa Zone in order to strengthen the findings. The selection of these *woredas* (mainly Dangur and Guba) was underpinned by the fact that the two *woredas* are the main foci of the recent rain-fed agricultural investments in the region, where pressure on the land resource is occurring. An increasing number of investment projects are present in the two areas. Within these *woredas*, some villages were carefully selected based on the concentration of investments, as well as expert opinion (particularly regarding accessibility and representativeness). Through this process, three *kebeles* from the Dangur *woreda* (Gimtiya, Dachigeri, and Qotta) and two *kebeles* from the Guba *woreda* (Ayicid and Mankush) were selected. In addition, the Berta ethnic group dominated Tsori-al-metema *kebele* in the Homosha *woreda* of the

Assosa Zone was also included. As part of the research strategy of direct observation, a brief field trip was made from the town of Mankush to the town of Almehal, so as to capture some important aspects that were not fully represented in the selected *kebeles*. These areas are considered important for studying the dynamics of land acquisitions, as they provide the opportunity to examine the dynamics around the emerging land-use change, particularly on land allocation practices, impacts on land resources, and land-use practices.

Generally, information for the study in these areas comes from a combination of data collection methods carried out during intensive fieldwork from April to June 2012. They include semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key informants, focus group discussions, direct field observation, and a secondary literature review. The in-depth interviews were conducted with seventeen key Gumuz informants and fourteen selected government officials and experts at various hierarchical levels. In-depth interviews with three informants from the Berta ethnic group were also conducted.[6] In addition, in the selected case study villages, a total of seven focus group discussions were conducted with the communities affected by the land acquisitions. Interviews were also conducted with five managers of investment projects operating in the study areas. However, unlike the Amhara region study areas, a household survey was not carried out in the Benishangul-Gumuz region study areas and relied mainly on qualitative information. As the focus of the research varied between the two regions, this has also led to the use of different research methods in each.

2.4 Data analysis

The process of data collection is not an end in itself and thus, the culminating activities are analysis, interpretation and presentation. In fact, according to Patton (1990), the challenge in data analysis and interpretation, particularly in the case of qualitative data, is to make sense out of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal.

Despite these challenges, the data collected in different ways (in both the Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz regions' study areas) was analyzed and interpreted to meet the objectives of the study. To this end, the analysis was done for qualitative and quantitative information separately, thus

involving both qualitative and quantitative analytical methods.[7] Narrative descriptions were used to analyze data collected through various qualitative techniques. All interviews and group discussions were conducted in local languages (the Amharic language in the Amhara region's study areas, and the Gumuz and Berta languages in the Benishangul-Gumuz region's study areas). All the tape-recorded interviews and group discussions were first transcribed on paper in the Amharic language, and then translated into English, which allowed better control over the translation. The content of the materials was sorted under different headings based on the topics included in the interview guides.

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software package was used to analyze quantitative information gathered through household survey tools. This involved coding and inputting the collected data to analyze and tabulate the results. This statistical analysis was used to complement qualitative data and analysis from interviews and focus groups discussions.

Notes

[1] *Dega*, *woina-dega*, and *kolla* are culturally embedded agro-ecological terms used to refer to the three main classifications: high, mid and low altitudinal ranges, respectively. These classifications are based primarily on altitude, climate and soil.

[2] My own survey reveals that 45% and 12.5% of the sampled households in the Tach Gayint and Fogera *woredas*, respectively, owned no oxen at all. Those owning a single ox accounted for 38.3% and 41.5 percent, respectively.

[3] The data used here was obtained from the Fogera *woreda* office of Agriculture. The office updates the data every year and the data indicated here are for the year 2011.

[4] The description of the livelihood zones is based mainly on information obtained from the Livelihood Implementation Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture, including data on agroecological characteristics and livelihood patterns (LIU/DMFSS 2008).

[5]In an early phase of my fieldwork within one of the study sites in the Fogera *woreda*, in a group where local land committee members were brought together with other local people, the discussion took an unexpected direction where some of the participants started fiercely insulting and accusing others, particularly targeting land committee members who were also present in the discussion. At the time, I was not able to control the situation, which was characterized by the aggressive behavior of some of the participants involved. With the help of two neutral parties, even-

tually the situation calmed down. After the incident, I spoke with the involved parties to reach some level of understanding, and thus was able to stabilize the situation, if only temporarily.

[6] The Gumuz ethnic group largely inhabits the Metekel and Kemashi administrative zones, whereas the Berta ethnic groups inhabit the Assosa administrative zone of the region, constituting the most numerous ethnic groups of the respective zones.

[7] Although qualitative and quantitative data involve separate analytical methods, the analysis process on the whole was an integrated one.

3 Rural vulnerability, land and livelihoods nexus in the contemporary era of ecological change and global land rush

3.1 Introduction

This chapter accomplishes several purposes, in which it further develops the theoretical framework already outlined in the introductory chapter. It deals with the review of literature mainly related to rural poverty, land and livelihoods nexus in the context of ecological change and global land rush. In doing so, the chapter intentionally includes discussions on a wider scale to look at pertinent literature from many sub-Saharan African countries and beyond that have some resonance to better understand and relate the Ethiopian case to the wider literature.

The chapter begins with the discussion of the background on the persistence of poverty and food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa followed by subsequent discussions on the link between agriculture and poverty reduction drawing evidence from some case studies across the developing world. Basically, the chapter is organized in two main sections each with subsections. The first main section reviews the main arguments and the available empirical evidence in the debate over the role of agriculture in economic growth and poverty reduction specifically whether smallholder agriculture in particular can provide a viable means to reduce poverty and persisting livelihoods insecurity in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Then it provides an overview on the link between land and livelihoods in the region as land continues to occupy at the centre of rural livelihoods in the contemporary context of ecological change and global land rush.

The second main section presents the Ethiopian case. It is organized in four subsections. The first one outlines the issues of land, vulnerability and livelihoods. Here, emphasis has been placed on the agricultural sector

since agriculture and agriculture related activities largely provide the means of living for the vast majority of rural households. The second subsection looks at and reflects on the links between land degradation, land tenure and livelihoods. It examines the effect of land tenure on land degradation and its implications to livelihoods as well as the implication of land scarcity on rural livelihoods drawing from evidence documented by other research undertaken in various parts of the country. The third considers the literature on livelihood diversification followed by discussions on migration issues. The final part of the chapter presents a short conclusion.

3.2 Poverty and vulnerability in rural sub-Saharan Africa

In retrospect, Africa endured the challenges of mass poverty mostly under the colonial rule in the twentieth century. As it walked through the twenty-first century, many things have changed including progress in terms of access to education and health services, civil liberties and political participation, rising incomes and exports, and rising investments (World Bank 2000: 7, Heidhues et al. 2004). Despite these, it continued to be engulfed with mounting development challenges such as widespread poverty, food insecurity, rapid population growth, climatic change and environmental degradation, large-scale unemployment, spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, adverse consequences of globalization, fragile political institutions and poor governance (World Bank 2000, Cheru 2002, Ellis 2006). It should be noted, however, that these enormous challenges are not in play uniformly across the region as the countries are diverse in several aspects particularly with regard to their history and culture, income levels, natural resource endowments, human resources, and geography (World Bank 2000: 7).

Poverty is not only an individual phenomenon but also a social and political one that imperils economies and societies in many ways (World Bank 2000: 84). As a result, addressing poverty has become a top priority in the development agenda of most African countries.

To this day, the challenges of rural poverty have continued to constitute one of the most pressing development problems in sub-Saharan Africa, anchoring widespread academic and political attention (Mueller 2011: 23, IFAD 2010, Mwabu and Thorbecke 2004). Poverty, predominantly a rural phenomenon, has been persistent in large parts of the region (Dercon 2009, Mwabu and Thorbecke 2004, IFAD 2010).

Ravallion et al. (2007: 693) estimate that about three-quarters of poor people in developing countries still live in rural areas but contend that poverty is becoming more urban. Sub-Saharan Africa in particular has the highest poverty rate, in which rural poverty is higher than its counterpart and as such, about 70% of the poor live in rural areas (ibid.). For instance, a comparative study of rural livelihoods and poverty reduction among four sub-Saharan African countries (namely Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Malawi) by Ellis and Freeman (2004: 6) demonstrated that poverty incidence is higher in rural areas than in urban.

Some authors (Dercon 2009, Staatz and Dembele 2007) suggest that focus has to be put on agricultural growth and rural development as central to poverty reduction policies while acknowledging the existence of differences in problems and opportunities among the countries. While several reasons can be attributed to the persistence of poverty in Africa, poor growth performance in national economies has been widely mentioned as a main constraint (Dercon 2009, Collier 2007). Cheru (2002: 9), however, points out that the causes for the persisting poverty in Africa are numerous that have continued to emerge and transform through historical and modern contexts. For a wide-range of scholars (e.g., Webb and von Braun 1994, Cheru 2002, Mwabu and Thorbecke 2004, Ellis 2006) the factors responsible for the persistence of poverty and rising vulnerability in rural areas constitute those from biophysical to political economy ones.

Food insecurity as one of the most pressing challenges has been recurring in the region which continued to hold center stage in generating development debates. As defined by the World Food Summit "food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO 1996: 2). This implies that food security comprises key elements including availability, access, sufficiency, and quality and safety of food (Hussein 2002, Kidane et al. 2006).

Globally, the first decade of the twenty-first century hosted a troubled prospect for achieving food security as the food price crisis that emerged in 2007-2008 ended up causing food riots in many countries (Holt-Giménez and Patel 2009). For instance, the total number of undernourished people in the world was estimated to surpass one billion in 2009 (FAO

2010b: 8). Consequently, these crises continued to underscore food security as one of the most challenging issues facing the world (Nelson et al. 2010: 1, FAO 2010b).

By 2010, from a total of 925 million undernourished people worldwide, 239 million were in sub-Saharan Africa. While the region with the most undernourished people continues to be Asia and the Pacific; sub-Saharan Africa remains the region with the highest proportion of undernourished people with an estimated 30% (FAO 2010b: 10-11).

More surprisingly, a recent food security assessment report (Shapouri et al. 2010: 18) reveals that about 390 million people of the region were estimated food insecure which implies that nearly half of the region's total population falls in this category. It is projected that by 2020, the region's food insecure population will exceed 500 million out of a total estimated roughly to reach one billion (ibid.: 20).

This upward spiral in food insecurity raises the possibility of future famine incidences in the region. Webb and von Braun (1994: 17) once noted "Africa is likely to remain the most fertile ground for famine well into the twenty-first century". Similarly, Devereux (2009) pointed out that although human beings have been able to develop the capacity to eradicate the threat of famine over the last century, hundreds of thousands of people in Africa still continued to endure the flames of famine through this century. Certainly, this was what happened in 2011 in the Horn of Africa in which roughly 10 million people were affected by the famine episode for which drought was labeled as the usual immediate trigger although the roots were many. Due to the persisting vulnerabilities, it appears that contemporary threats of chronic food insecurity have become endemic to sub-Saharan Africa (Baro and Deubel 2006, Devereux 2009, Vanhaute 2011), particularly confined to the Sahel, the Horn, and Southern Africa (Webb and von Braun 1994). Food insecurity does not usually affect the whole population in a given country, rather it affects specific groups of vulnerable people who do not have access to key productive resources such as land, labour, and capital in order to produce or purchase food (Boussard et al. 2005).

The causes for the persistent food insecurity problems can be attributed to a variety of interrelated and complex factors. The main causes include climatic change, environmental degradation, high population growth, inappropriate macroeconomic policies, poor infrastructure, high

disease burden, low agricultural productivity, lack of livelihood diversification and non-farm employment, political inequalities and violent conflicts (Webb and von Braun 1994, Devereux and Maxwell 2001, Baro and Deubel 2006, Haile 2005, Clover 2003, Tolossa 2005a, Cheru 2002).

3.2.1 Smallholder agriculture and poverty reduction

Most poor rural people in the developing world depend on agriculture for their livelihoods in one way or another and most of them are smallholder farmers. It has been estimated that about 86% of rural people depend on agriculture as a major source of their livelihoods (World Bank 2007). In light of facts such as these, it is logical to assume that a focus on agricultural development is a way out from poverty for hundreds of millions of poor people in rural areas who are invariably dependent on smallholder production. This should not, however, overshadow the fact that rural people are engaged in diversified non-farm activities to increase their incomes and diversify risks. In this regard, most countries in sub-Saharan Africa represent examples of such a case.

The performance of economies in many sub-Saharan African countries is closely related to productivity growth in the agricultural sector, which implies that overall economic growth and poverty reduction efforts in the region are greatly determined by the performance of this sector (Mwambu and Thorbecke 2004, Diao et al. 2010, Christiaensen and Demery 2007, Staatz and Dembele 2007).

Although the debate on agriculture as an engine to economic growth and overall development was longstanding (Lewis 1954, Johnston and Mellor 1961, Schultz 1964), it is back on the international agenda in a renewed form, particularly associated with the World Bank's focus in its 2008 World Development Report: Agriculture for Development (Wiggins et al. 2010, Christiaensen et al. 2010). According to recent literature, it appears that the main reason for the re-emergence of agriculture is related to the understanding of the importance of overall growth to poverty reduction, in which agricultural growth takes a critical role (Jama and Pizarro 2008). In line with this, the fact that the agricultural sector is the dominant one in developing economies, coupled with the belief that 'poverty is concentrated in agriculture and rural areas', implies the development of this sector as critical for fostering overall economic growth (World Bank 2007).

More importantly, the food price crises of 2007–2008 and 2010 that occurred throughout the world greatly affected the rural poor, in which its combined effect may have added tens of millions of people to the number of hungry people worldwide. This was a warning bell to global efforts to achieve food security for the growing world population, which, in turn, has reinforced global focus on the agricultural sector (Christiaensen et al. 2010, IFAD 2010, Wiggins et al. 2010, Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011).

Many would agree about the prominent role of agriculture in the early stages of the development process in launching an economic transformation though its role tends to change as national development proceeds to higher levels (Hazell et al. 2010, World Bank 2007). This had been evident in some countries such as China and Vietnam, in which rapid agricultural growth served as an engine for the growth of the industrial sector (World Bank 2007). Although there appears to be growing skepticism on the continued role of agriculture as the effects of globalization and trade liberalizations are being felt all over the world (Hazell et al. 2007), the central question rather has become focused on debating the pathway through which the role of agriculture for reducing global poverty could be realized. However, for some, such as those at the World Bank (e.g., World Bank 2007), there seems to be too much faith in the trade liberalization trend, in which a potential positive impact to accrue particularly to the smallholder farming sector where the majority of the rural poor are found.

Despite the role of the publication of the *World Development Report 2008* that reflected a revived interest in agricultural growth for poverty reduction, many critics (e.g., Akram-Lodhi 2008, McMichael 2009, Kay 2009, Rizzo 2009, Woodhouse 2009, Hall 2009, Oya 2009) have pointed out its many apparent internal contradictions and vague assertions which leads to inconclusive policy implications. Akram-Lodhi (2008) argues that as a consequence of its emphasis on transforming smallholders' systems of production towards 'a modernized', 'commercially-oriented' and 'new agriculture', "it does not focus upon the root sources of power, privilege, and poverty in global agriculture" (ibid.: 1160). Rather than addressing the agrarian structures leading up to the process of accumulation and the issues that cause global agrarian crisis, it simply provided prescriptions for agriculture's capitalization that is linked to global corporate agriculture. He concludes that what the Bank's report can offer is the justification for the consolidation of corporate food regimes and, hence, the establishment of global agrarian capitalism that militate against the future of smallholder

farmers. Similarly, McMichael (2009) rejects the claims of the Bank's report arguing that it does not provide 'a fresh look' at the agricultural sector instead reaffirms its discourses of development with recent transformation trends in global corporate food regime. He pointed to one of the contradictions that while the 'new agriculture' emphasized in the report acknowledges the need to take ecological concerns into account; it 'cautiously' advocated the move towards biofuels. The worrying concern is that the legitimacy and dominance of the corporate food regime may benefit a relatively small group of capitalist farmers but it will increase the process of social differentiation leading to the proletarianisation of most peasants (Kay 2009) and, hence, the benefits will not 'trickle-down' to the majority of poor rural people (McMichael 2009).

The success story of the Green Revolution in Asian countries has been cited as evidence in reinforcing the efficiency of smallholders and their capacity in reducing poverty and raising standard of living among the rural people (Rosegrant and Hazell 2000, Hazell et al. 2007, World Bank 2007, Wiggins 2009, Christiaensen et al. 2010). In addition, what has been considered crucial in the smallholder argument contemplates around the Chayanovian argument of 'an inverse relationship between farm size and production per unit of land' and their ability to achieve both poverty reduction and equity objectives concurrently (Lipton 1993, Ellis and Biggs 2001, Hazell et al. 2007). On the other extreme, proponents of large-scale agriculture base their arguments widely on the advantages of large-scale farms compared to small farms associated with economies of scale advantage, market and technological innovations, and capital availability (Ashley and Maxwell 2001, Baglioni and Gibbon 2013).

The fact that many of the rural poor are smallholder farmers underscores that agricultural growth based on smallholder farming deserve focus as a 'viable' strategy for fostering overall economic growth and reducing global poverty on the stance that smallholder farming plays key roles regarding employment of rural labour, food security, environmental protection, equity and in establishing a viable rural livelihood. But who are the smallholders, and what features characterize them? What are the key issues in this 'smallholder debate'?

Smallholder farming is defined in diverse ways. It has been acknowledged that there is no precise or universally accepted definition for the term 'smallholder' agriculture (Narayanan and Gulati 2002). As a result, a

smallholder can be defined in various ways depending on the varied contexts. The concept is often relative and value-laden, used interchangeably with small-scale, family, peasant, subsistence, low-income, non-commercial, resource poor, low-input use, or low-technology farming (Kirsten and Zyl 1998, Nagayets 2005, Brüntrup and Heidhues 2002).

Most definitions refer to farm size in characterizing small-scale farms, in which they are defined as those that operate with less than 2 hectares of cropland (Anriquez and Bonomi 2007, World Bank 2007, Narayanan and Gulati 2002), though there are regional differences on the notion of what size is small. For example, in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, in areas where population density is high, usually smallholder farmers cultivate less than one hectare and, in areas of low population density the land size farmed may reach up to 10 hectares or more (Dixon et al. 2004). Others emphasize the origin for most of the labor needed for farming. Lipton (2005: 1), for instance, defines family farms as "operated units in which most labor and enterprise come from the farm family, which puts much of its working time into the farm". Similarly, World Bank (2007: 91) conceptualizes smallholder farming as "family farming, a small-scale farm operated by a household with limited hired labor". In a related vein, Narayanan and Gulati (2002: 5) describe the smallholder as "a farmer (crop or livestock) practicing a mix of commercial and subsistence production or either, where the family provides the majority of labour and the farm provides the principal source of income". Another important element in characterizing smallholder farmers was picked by Dixon et al. (2004: 1), in which the term refers to "their limited resource endowments relative to other farmers in the sector". Thus, the definition of smallholder farming differs across various contexts and schools of thought. It is possible, however, to pinpoint some of the widely shared features of smallholder farming such as limited resource endowments (land, capital and skills), vulnerability to risk, the use of low-input, backward technologies, and poor market linkages (Dixon et al. 2004, Lipton 2005).

Agriculture's role in development

In the last half a century or so, agriculture was not considered essential for overall economic growth, particularly as the sector remained traditional and less productive in developing countries (Christiaensen et al. 2010). The ability of the sector to contribute to economic growth in terms of its

role to GDP, foreign exchange earnings, employment and savings was often overlooked. The "two-sector surplus labor" theoretical model formulated by Arthur Lewis in 1954 was a classic example that reflected pessimistic views towards the agricultural sector of developing countries. According to Lewis, 'least developed countries' were assumed to have dual sectors: a traditional agricultural sector characterized by low productivity, low incomes and savings, and high unemployment; and a more modern technologically advanced industrial sector. He proposed the transfer of the surplus labor (characterized by zero marginal productivity) to the urban industrial sector where wages are deemed higher that could be consumed and saved. Such thinking gave primacy to the industrial sector and became the guiding development theory for the policies of developing countries during the 1960s and resulted in agriculture being squeezed for its labour and resources meant for the expansion of the industrial sector (Lewis 1954).

However, agriculture had played a predominant role in launching structural transformation, and historical reviews show that only very few countries have ever achieved rapid economic growth without agricultural development at their early stage of development process (Hazell et al. 2007, Hazell et al. 2010). The prioritization of industrial growth during the 1950s did not result in the anticipated trickledown effects of economic growth (i.e., distributional effect of the benefits of economic growth to the poor), and the provision of adequate jobs to accommodate the rural labor hardly occurred. The neglect of the agricultural sector rather constrained its potential to provide the required capital for industrial takeoff, rural employment and reduce poverty (Wiggins et al. 2010). It was against this backdrop that the role of agriculture was considered central, in which at the early stage of development process it should grow preceding or at least parallel to the development of the industrial sector so as to invigorate its potential in providing resources required for industrial investment or to be reinvested in it (Johnston and Mellor 1961).

More recently, a renaissance of interest for agricultural development has been observed. As a result, the role of 'agriculture for development' has gained a renewed interest in the wider policy debates.[1] Several empirical studies have demonstrated the critical role of agriculture for overall poverty reduction. The study by Ligon and Sadoulet (2007), for example, indicates that agricultural growth tends to benefit the poorest households more than the non-agricultural income growth, in which they found out

that a 1% growth in GDP derived from agriculture implies a more than 6% increase in the growth of the expenditure for the poorest deciles. Another recent empirical study (Christiaensen et al. 2010: 30) supports the overall argument that increasing the productivity of the agricultural sector as central for designing effective poverty reduction, particularly for low-income and resource poor countries. The study (Christiaensen et al. 2010: 30) simulated a 1% growth in GDP per capita each in both agricultural and non-agriculture to see their marginal effect on total poverty. The empirical findings of this study reveal that growth in agriculture was found to be more than five times as poverty reducing than growth in non-agriculture, especially in resource poor low-income countries and, surprisingly, it was more than eleven times more poverty reducing than growth outside of agriculture in sub-Saharan African countries. Similarly, another study (Diao et al. 2010) used an economy-wide simulation model to examine the role of agriculture for poverty reduction for six African countries.[2] For example, in Ethiopia if the current growth compositions (annual GDP growth rate of 3.1%) are maintained, then the poverty headcount will be 44.3% by the year 2015. However, accelerating growth in agriculture by 5% a year results in the reduction of poverty headcount to 26.5% by 2015 and, in contrast, growth driven by 7% growth rate in non-agricultural sector will only reduce the poverty to 37.3%.

What still remains to be extensively debated is the pathway (small-scale versus large-scale farms) by which agricultural growth makes such contributions to poverty reduction. Despite the on-going debates, the World Development Report (World Bank 2007) underscores that the potential role of agriculture for overall growth and poverty reduction can be realized if the productivity of smallholders is enhanced since the overwhelming majority of farmers in developing countries are smallholders farming less than 2 hectares of land. As the success of the Green revolution in Asia made it evident, improving the productivity of smallholder farmers would play a fundamental role in the fight against global poverty (Hazell et al. 2010).[3]

Smallholders are important due to the fact that they constitute the overwhelming majority of the rural poor and produce a large proportion of agricultural production (Narayanan and Gulati 2002, De Schutter 2011, van der Ploeg 2013). Particularly, longstanding debates regarding the choice of pathways by which agriculture would play a critical role for

growth and poverty reduction based mainly on the consideration of attributes such as efficiency, scale, equity and poverty reduction ability.

3.2.2 Land-rural livelihoods nexus in sub-Saharan Africa

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, land is a fundamental resource viewed not only as an economic asset, but also an essential element in the formation of individual and group identity, constituting the cultural, political and social fabric of rural people (IFAD 2008: 5). Access to productive land thus represents a key issue for ensuring food security and poverty reduction in the region. Agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa provides a means of living for millions of smallholders, generating 34% of GDP and 65% of employment (Quan 2011: 2). For this, access to land constitutes a determining factor.

While secure access to productive land is critical for the livelihoods of millions of poor people living in rural areas, current trends and patterns suggest that access to this key resource in many African countries, particularly among poor rural households has been in decline attributed to growing demographic pressure, worsening land degradation, and land alienations (FAO 2010a, Cotula et al. 2004, Jayne et al. 2010).

In broad terms, it has widely been argued that unequal land access is a bottleneck to poverty reduction and economic growth. In that sense, it is implied that when people gain equitable and secure access to land, economic growth performance tends to be higher and more broadly distributed among the society. Relative to other regions such as Latin America, inequality of land distribution is limited in most sub-Saharan African countries (Cotula et al. 2004). However, Southern African countries still experience inequitable land distribution patterns due to the historical legacy of racially-based policies of colonial rule in the region (Moyo 2000, 2004, Cotula et al. 2004, Jayne et al. 2006). For example, white South Africans, who constitute only 5% of the population of the country, possessed about 87% of the country's land demonstrating the extremely skewed nature of land distribution in South Africa (Moyo 2000). The average size of landholding per capita in South Africa also speaks for itself, as black farmers own slightly more than a hectare on average compared to 1,570 hectares for white farmers. Similarly, the pattern of land distribution in the case of Zimbabwe also reveals that approximately 4,500 white farmers held about 42% of the country's agricultural land until the end of 1990s, while 41% of the land was held by 1.2 million farming families (ibid.). The

situation however is changing. During the last three decades of land reform, particularly through the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) which began in 2000, agricultural land which was formerly controlled by minority white farmers has been redistributed to over 240,000 peasant families changing the trend of highly skewed land distribution in Zimbabwe and thus, it reversed the racial patterns of land ownership by widening access to land across different ethnic groups (Moyo 2011, see also Scoones et al. 2010).

Jayne et al. (2006: 1) pointed out that limited and unequal land access has been among the principal challenges facing smallholders in sub-Saharan African countries and they argued that the distribution of land is highly unequal. One important point here is that high inequality in the distribution of land is not only limited between minority white commercial farmers and majority black smallholders, as in the case of South Africa, Zimbabwe and few other countries; research has also documented that major disparities in land distribution have been witnessed within the smallholder sector itself. For example, a study by Jayne et al. (2003) indicated the existence of large inequalities in the distribution of land within the small-scale farming sector in Eastern and Southern African countries. Drawing from household surveys between 1990 and 2000 in Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Mozambique, and Zambia, the study found out that farm landholding size showed declining patterns overtime, in which roughly about a quarter of farming households in each study country owned farm size less than 0.10 hectare per capita, almost reaching the status of landlessness. In addition to the diminishing farm sizes, the distribution of available land tends to be becoming more concentrated over time within these smallholders (ibid.: 253). They argued that "mean farm size figures mask great variations in land access within the smallholder sector" as evidenced in these five countries (ibid.: 261).

Table 3.1
Land distribution among smallholders in some selected sub-Saharan African countries

Country	Sample size	Ave. land access per HH (ha)	Household per capita land access (ha)					Gini Coefficients	
				Quartile					
			Average	1	2	3	4	Land per HH	Land per capita
Kenya	1 416	2.65	0.41	0.08	0.17	0.31	1.10	0.55	0.56
Ethiopia	2 658	1.17	0.24	0.03	0.12	0.22	0.58	0.55	0.55
Rwanda (1984)	2 018	1.2	0.28	0.07	0.15	0.26	0.62	---	---
Rwanda (1990)	1 181	0.94	0.17	0.05	0.10	0.16	0.39	0.43	0.43
Rwanda (2000)	1 584	0.71	0.16	0.02	0.06	0.13	0.43	0.52	0.54
Malawi	5 657	0.99	0.22	0.08	0.15	0.25	0.60	---	---
Zambia	6 618	2.76	0.56	0.12	0.26	0.48	1.36	0.44	0.50
Mozambique	3 851	2.1	0.48	0.10	0.23	0.40	1.16	0.45	0.51

Source: Jayne et al. (2003: 262 table 4)

In this case, for instance, Jayne et al.'s (2003) study indicates that households in the highest per capita land quartile (after all smallholder households were ranked based on household per capita land size) held between eight to 20 times more land than those households in the lowest quartile (see Table 3.1). In Kenya, mean farmland access size for the top and bottom quartiles were 1.10 and 0.08 hectares per capita, respectively (Table 3.1). Note that consideration of large-scale farms in the study countries would raise even further the observed inequality of landholdings (Jayne et al. 2010: 1386). Surprisingly, farmers in the bottom quartile in Rwanda (in 2000), as indicated in the table above, owned only 0.02 hectares per capita. Landholdings per household in the study countries range from 0.71 hectares in Rwanda to 2.76 hectares in Zambia (Table 3.1). Notwithstanding these findings, others also point out that about 60% of Rwanda's all agricultural holdings measure less than 0.5 hectares (Moyo 2004: 34).

The issue of land access goes well beyond just mere small size of holdings and inequitable land distributions. According to Jayne et al. (2003: 270) a positive association has been found between household per capita land holdings and per capita income in each of the countries included in

their study though the association is particularly strong among households whose landholding size fall below the median level. For instance, they found that an increase in landholding from zero to 0.25 hectares entails an increase in per capita income by more than 40% in Rwanda and about 30% in Ethiopia (ibid.: 270).

Given the strong relationship between access to land, agricultural growth, and household income, it has been consistently argued that improving access to land, especially among the severely land-constrained smallholder households, would be an effective way for poverty reduction (Jayne et al. 2003: 271). Viewing from different perspectives, they concluded that:

> Notwithstanding our earlier conclusion about the importance of agricultural growth, under existing conditions the ability of this bottom land quartile to escape from poverty directly through agricultural productivity growth is constrained by their limited access to land and other resources. Viewed in a static way, one could conclude that the only way out of poverty for the severely land-constrained rural poor is to increase their access to land. Viewed within a dynamic structural transformation framework, this group's brightest prospect for escape from poverty may involve being pulled off the farm into productive non-farm sectors (ibid.: 271-272).

Moyo (2004), one of the radical political economy researchers on the land issue in southern Africa, underscores that poverty trends in sub-Saharan Africa are strikingly linked to the fundamental question of land access. He argues that "access to a diminishing land resource base and insecure land tenure has most profound effects on the livelihoods of the majority, defining the peculiarly African character of the land question under dryland farming conditions using backward technologies" (ibid.: 32). However, against the backdrop of diminishing land access to low income rural households, upward trends in large-scale land acquisitions have been occurring in the region (FAO 2010a: 4, Hall 2011, German et al. 2013, Hall et al. 2015).

Large-scale land acquisitions

Despite the small size of landholdings and its inequitable distribution pattern, paradoxically the sub-Saharan Africa region is perceived to have 'abundant' land resources (Livingston et al. 2011: 12, FAO 2010a: 3, UNECA 2009: 117). This claim appears to have captured the attention of

foreign and domestic investors as seen in recent large-scale land acquisitions taking place in the region, particularly since the second half of the 2000s (Castel and Kamara 2009, Cotula et al. 2011, Cotula et al. 2009, Hall 2011, Hall et al. 2015). Some claim (Moyo 2004: 32) that it is plausible that total area size tends to be large in most African countries although much of the land in the total size accounting is located in arid lowlands with poor soil quality and with unevenly distributed water resources. In addition, tsetse fly prevalence hinders farming of much of the arable land in the continent. This fact resulted in high population pressure in relatively inhabitable environments, which in turn pushed per capita access to arable land towards very low levels.

Although land has always been central to the livelihoods of millions of smallholders, the issue has gained particular momentum today due to the heightened and fierce competition for this critical resource, involving a wide range of actors. This scramble for prime agricultural land is explained by a multitude of interconnected and mutually reinforcing factors and processes occurring at a global level: the development of capitalism and capital accumulation imperative being the key denominator (Akram-Lodhi 2012, Arrighi et al. 2010). The major factors include high population growth, high food and fuel prices, high demand for biofuels and animal feeds, growing demand for minerals, the impacts of climate change, the expansion of trade regimes and the emergence of consumer- and corporate-driven food systems (IFAD 2008, Borras et al. 2010, McMichael 2010, HLPE 2011, De Schutter 2011, Borras and Franco 2012, Akram-Lodhi 2012).

In particular, the global food price crises that occurred in 2007–2008, and even as recently as 2010, have greatly affected the poor. The combined effect of the crises may have added tens of millions of people to the numbers of hungry people worldwide (Christiaensen et al. 2010, IFAD 2010), and further complicated the food insecurity in many vulnerable countries, on the one hand, and in capital-rich countries that hitherto had depended on global food markets, on the other. This, in turn, has reinforced the global focus on the agricultural sector in general and the acquisition of large tracts of farmland in particular. As a result, several private and sovereign investors from a range of countries in the Gulf, Asia and Europe have been involved in large-scale land acquisitions in developing countries, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, but also in Southeast Asia, the former Soviet countries and Latin America, to cultivate food crops and biofuels for the

export market (White and Dasgupta 2010, Borras et al. 2011, Hall 2011, Borras and Franco 2012, HLPE 2011, Cotula et al. 2011, FAO 2010, Visser and Spoor 2011, Zoomers 2010, Wolford and Nehring 2015, Van der Ploeg et al. 2015, Hall et al. 2015).[4] Evidence shows that from 2004 to 2008 a total of some 2 million hectares of land were allocated in Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar and Mali (Cotula et al. 2011: 100).

In most cases, African governments have welcomed such large-scale land investments considering it an opportunity for the transformation of their agricultural sector, seen as 'backward' subsistence-based smallholder farming, particularly through technology transfer, expansion of local infrastructure, rural employment generation and towards achieving national food security (Salami et al. 2010, von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009, Vermeulen and Cotula 2010, De Schutter 2011, Woodhouse 2012). Furthermore, the responses from host governments in a dozen of African countries have been to promote investor friendly land market policies such as low land rents, tax waivers, and limited restrictions on production and exports.

In understanding the main issues embedded in recent large-scale land acquisitions, debates around its contemporary political economy have tended to follow at least two main lines of conceptions, influencing the ways in which a range of interest groups perceive and contest the politics around it. The first line of argument focuses on the implications for local communities, arguing that such acquisitions threaten the livelihoods and food security of millions of poor rural people, as well as raise the risks of environmental destruction and social and political upheavals. This strand of narrative, which is in a stark contrast to the positions taken up by mainstream international financial institutions, particularly stresses its ramifications for agrarian structural change and a subsequent process of social differentiation. It firmly argues that what emerges is a type of agrarian structure that produces the processes of accumulation ostensibly predicated upon mechanisms of, what the agrarian political economy literature calls, social differentiation (e.g., Akram-Lodhi 2008: 1160, Kay 2009: 128, McMichael 2008, Veltmeyer 2004). This peasant differentiation and expanded marginalization will in turn lead to depeasantization and massive proletarianization, forcing peasants to mainly subsist on selling their labour. Such corporate-driven agricultural structure exemplifies agrarian capitalist accumulation by lowering the cost of labour in which the end result is that it "rules out a place for peasants, physically expelling them

from the land, and epistemologically removing them from history" (McMichael 2008: 213, see also Veltmeyer 2004, Kay 2000). The second line of argument, mainly spearheaded by international financial institutions and development agencies, argues that large-scale land investments have considerable potential to contribute to multiple development objectives of developing countries if managed well while at the same time acknowledging the challenges and risks posed (World Bank 2010, Deininger 2011). This mainstream development discourse argues that the main problems that could result from the wave of these investments can be minimized and regulated to ensure that the investments do not adversely affect local communities. To this end, they proposed the need to improve the transparency and accountability of the deals and processes culminating in such investments in order to translate the anticipated opportunities into a 'win-win-win' deal (in which benefits will be shared equitably between local communities, host governments and investors). At the backdrop of this optimistic standpoint, the Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investments (RAI) were proposed by the World Bank and others (FAO, IFAD, UNCTAD) to regulate these investments for a better result. However, such moves for a 'responsible investment' have suffered from wide-ranging criticisms (Borras and Franco 2010, De Schutter 2011, Li 2011). More recently, the Committee on World Food Security came with more far-reaching, but still voluntary, guidelines (Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure) (FAO 2012).

Although new opportunities could be created from increases in land investments for national growth, critical questions regarding the land rights of poor local communities still remain central and inadequately addressed. Empirical evidence is sparse with regard to actual and potential impacts of land-use change on the poor, who are at risk of losing access to and control over land. Many recent acquisitions have entailed the dispossession and displacement of rural households, damaging their local livelihoods, food security and access to key natural resources (HLPE 2011, Borras et al. 2011, Rahmato 2011, Moreda 2013, Hall et al. 2015). Due to inherent asymmetrical power relations, such large-scale land acquisitions involving powerful national and international corporate actors are more likely to put local livelihoods at risk (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009).

This inequality in bargaining power is exacerbated when the smallholders whose land is being acquired for foreign investment projects have no formal

> title to the land, but have been using it under customary tenure arrangements. Since the state often formally owns the land, the poor run the risk of being pushed off the plot in favor of the investor, without consultation or compensation. Land is an inherently political issue across the globe, with land reform and land rights issues often leading to violent conflict. The addition of another actor competing for this scarce and contested resource can add to socio-political instability in developing countries (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009: 2).

Particularly, it is clear that poor people with insecure tenure relations are the most vulnerable groups to be dispossessed and displaced from their land on which they depend (IFAD 2008: 7).

Large-scale land acquisitions and political reactions 'from below'

Large-scale land acquisitions do not always result in local communities losing their land and livelihoods, although in many instances they have led to the dispossession and displacement of peasants, pastoralists and indigenous people (HLPE 2011, Borras et al. 2011, Rahmato 2011, Hall et al. 2015). Those communities affected by such acquisitions may not necessarily engage in outright resistance, as this depends on the particular contexts in which they are situated (Borras and Franco 2013, Hall et al. 2015).

If we are to examine the reactions of local communities against the large-scale land acquisitions today, then *a priori* understanding of the concept of resistance is critical. Although there is the risk of oversimplification, this section tries to achieve its goal through consulting the dominant literature about the conceptualization of local resistance. For almost the past four decades or so, a number of scholars have been engaged in the study of peasant resistance, heavily influencing current debates about its conceptualization (e.g., Scott 1976, 1985, 1987, Kerkvliet 1986, 1993, 2005, 2009, Isaacman 1990, Moore 1998).

In the context of contemporary land grabs, local communities who have faced land alienation or are being threatened by displacement as a result of current land acquisitions engage in different forms of resistance in order to maintain their socio-cultural identities and moral economies (Scott 1976, Walker 2008, Malseed 2008). From 'a moral economy discourse', when the actions of the state and other actors threaten or cause damage to the local livelihoods of rural communities that are often characterized by distinct cultural identities, then the morality of 'the subsistence ethic' is disrupted and will likely lead to rebellion (Scott 1976: 3).

Here, the subsistence aspect of peasant households forms the central tenet of Scott's argument. He understands peasants as moral and political actors who can defend their values as well as their individual security.

Viewed in this light, local rural communities engage in various forms of resistance to counteract the processes that threaten their livelihoods (Scott 1985, Walker 2008, Malseed 2008, Schneider 2011). Differences in the strategy of peasant resistance emanates from multiplicities in their political behaviour and relative strengths that in turn depends on their particular context (Isaacman 1990: 21), the forms of appropriation and appropriating class they are facing (Scott 1985) and their own historical experience as well as their cultural background (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2012). As local rural communities can be politically fractured and socially differentiated in more complex ways than is often assumed, the impact of land grabs on and within even small communities can be differentiated, and consequently their reaction to it will likewise be differentiated depending on their particular economic, political, social and cultural contexts (Borras and Franco 2013).

Much of the debate has been related to the definition of resistance and what actions actually qualify as resistance. Scott (1985: 290) asserts that

> class resistance includes any act (s) by a member (s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended either to mitigate or deny claims made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis those superordinate classes.

Kerkvliet (2009: 233) defined resistance as "what people do that shows disgust, anger, indignation or opposition to what they regard as unjust, unfair, illegal claims on them by people in higher, more powerful class and status positions or institutions". What stands out clearly in these definitions is that resistance comprises thoughts as well as actions. In his most influential work on the *Weapons of the weak*, based on the case of a Malaysian village, Scott (1985: xvi) identifies diverse forms of everyday resistance that include verbal characterization of superiors, dissimulation, pilfering, foot dragging, sabotage, false compliance, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, desertion, and so on. In this work, he demonstrated that while engaging in these various forms of resistance, 'subaltern' people belittled dominance and hence were not mere victims of hegemony.

However, other scholars have argued that such actions do not actually qualify to be considered as resistance since they do not have revolutionary potential: they do not directly challenge the underlying political system and hence are not politically effective. Drawing from Marx's discussion, Das (2007: 363) pointed out that

> as long as grassroots agency is confined to and aimed at a power structure within its own immediate vicinity, it is necessarily self-defeating. Class power is concentrated in the state at the national level, and those who proclaim the efficacy of everyday forms of resistance tend to forget this.

For this reason, it has been argued that resistance needs to be organized via the collective action of many people that directly threatens and challenges the system of oppression.

Scott and Kerkvliet, using 'moral economy' as an important concept, however, note that the reactions of peasants against exploitation and subordination often tend to be individualized, unorganized and localized forms of insurgency that do not often make headlines. For Scott particularly, excluding these forms of peasant actions from the category of 'real resistance' would "fundamentally misconstrue[s] the very basis of the economic and political struggle conducted daily by subordinate classes in repressive settings" (Scott 1985: 292), and he warns that those who hold these views will "miss the very wellsprings of peasant politics" (ibid.: 295). The goal of most everyday peasant resistances is not, after all, "to overthrow or transform a system of domination but rather to survive…within it" (Scott 1987: 424). Following Scott, Isaacman (1990: 33) also underscores the significance of everyday forms of resistance, in which "to ignore the weapons of the weak is to ignore the peasants' principal arsenal". Indeed, Scott strongly argues that formal political activity involving co-ordination among many people is generally exercised by the elites, the intelligentsia, and the middle classes, since they are in a better position to gain easy access to the institutions of the state and other targeted actors to contest with. Peasants are likely to have limited access to these institutions and thus "it would be naïve to expect that peasant resistance can or will normally take the same form" (Scott 1985: 299). Empirically, Kerkvliet (2005) has shown the power of everyday politics in transforming national policies, for example in the case of Vietnam. Nevertheless, as Borras and Franco (2010b: 23) argue, the ground for exercising everyday politics is not smooth and is played out under various constraining structures that

make such activities difficult political endeavours. These constraints undermine the capacity of peasants to pursue their agendas further and, hence, such resistance generally does not have far-reaching consequences.

A crucial issue that emerged from these debates therefore relates to 'what really counts as resistance'. Scott demonstrates that such forms of peasant politics need not necessarily be effective to be considered resistance: for him, what is important is the intention of the actions more than the outcome, although it is sometimes difficult to understand the intentions behind some actions. This conception is essential because the very presence of resistance is often an indicator of the existence of discontent among the resisters towards the rules of the 'development' endeavour pursued by the state and other elite groups. In the context of this study, as will be discussed in Chapter 8, the reactions of the Gumuz people in Ethiopia to recent and ongoing large-scale land acquisitions target those individuals and groups, including the state, that have participated and facilitated the land acquisitions in one way or another.

Land tenure, agricultural productivity and land degradation

For millions of smallholders and pastoralists, access to land resources with tenure security is among the most critical factors that influence their options and prospects to improve their livelihoods and for enhancing environmental sustainability.

Land tenure security[5] refers to the perception of individuals or groups with regard to their rights to a parcel of land on a continual basis, free from imposition or interference from others (e.g., the state or other individuals), as well as their ability to reap and make use of the benefits of labor or capital invested in land, either in use or upon alienation (Place et al. 1994: 19). It comprises three main elements with legal and economic dimensions: breadth, duration and assurance. The legal dimension features robustness, or breadth and duration of rights. Breadth represents the bundle of rights held which may include rights of use, transfer, and exclusion; whereas duration refers to the length of time under which a given land right will last. With respect to the economic dimension, there should be adequate duration of rights to enable the holder to make use of benefits which will be obtained as a result of investment on land. Assurance underlines that all land rights are recognized and held with certainty. Viewed from an economic perspective, land tenure insecurity thus arises from a sense of, or a function of elements which include "inadequate number of

absolute rights, inadequate duration in one or more rights, lack of assurance in exerting rights, or high costs of enforcing rights" (ibid.: 21). However, the term tenure (in)security has been used in a variety of ways often with little attention to the different meanings attached (Van Gelder 2010). Van Gelder (2010: 451) identifies three kinds of tenure security: legal tenure security, de facto tenure security and perceived tenure security. Legal tenure security refers to the legal status of tenure, in which the right of access to and use of land is provided by legal rules. The de facto tenure security refers to the actual situation on the ground about land access and control, regardless of the legal status in which it is held. The concept of perceived tenure security views security as it is perceived by landholders (see Van Gelder 2010).

A substantial body of literature (e.g., IFAD 2008, 2010, Cheru 2002) demonstrates that land tenure security plays a central role in influencing investment decisions of farmers with positive implications for improved agricultural productivity and environmental sustainability. Cheru (2002: 98) asserts that the lack of tenure security is one of the most important 'non-technical' factors constraining agriculture in many African countries. Similarly, a study by Salami et al. (2010) found that uncertainty attributed to land tenure insecurity together with inadequate land access has been identified as a critical challenge to smallholders in East Africa. One basic thing that has to be clear at this point however, is not to *a priori* embrace the neo-classical theoretical arguments that link private property regime to more investment and productivity, as there are some objections that stand in contrast to such notion. We will shortly turn to consider this counter-argument.

Indeed, an issue that needs attention is the situation of land degradation that obviously poses an important challenge to agricultural development in the continent. According to a report (UNECA 2009: 129) Africa has 500 million hectares of moderately or severely degraded land, accounting for 27% of total land degradation in the world. In the face of such a huge magnitude, it may not be difficult to imagine the challenge it could impose onto the livelihoods of most of the rural poor. In economic terms, for example, Diao and Sarpong (2011: 263), in their recent economy-wide analysis of the poverty implications of land degradation in Ghana, showed that as a result of land degradation Ghana's agricultural income was predicted to decline by a total of US$ 4.2 billion over the period from 2006 to 2015. As a result, they predicted that the country's national poverty rate

would increase by 5.4% points in 2015 and concluded that land degradation greatly constrains agricultural productivity.

By and large, land tenure insecurity has been cited as one of the major factors behind the accelerated land degradation through its negative effects on long-term investment in sustainable land management practices (UNECA 2009). The tenure security-investment relationship is based essentially on the argument that when farmers feel secure regarding their long-term use of their land, it provides them with an incentive to make land investments. This implies that farmers' willingness to invest in improving productivity and land conservation practices will be largely predicated by the security of their tenure. In addition, the security of tenure also predicates the realization of land as collateral for accessing financial services and improves their capacity to take advantage of market opportunities (IFAD 2008, Feder 1988, De Soto 2000).

However, several studies (e.g., Neef 2001, Brasselle et al. 2002, Gray and Kevane 2001) have shown that the lack of tenure security may not inevitably lead to a decline in investments in land and that the correlation between land tenure and land conservation practices is not necessarily unidirectional as often argued. Causality can be observed in both directions. A sense of insecurity may stimulate investment in land conservation, such as tree planting, in order to enhance long-term tenure security. As cogently argued by Sjaastad and Bromley (1997: 559), causality may, more importantly, run the other way in which land-based investments may work as a prerequisite for tenure security. They concluded that "tenure security is a result, as well as a cause of land use decisions" (ibid.: 559, see also Gray 2003).

Notwithstanding this, the issue of land tenure systems has received a great deal of attention with regard to its connection with land degradation. For instance, aware of the importance of tenure security, since their independence African governments have been engaged in pursuing various policies and programmes with the objective of enhancing tenure security as a way to enhance agricultural productivity and reverse the widespread land degradation (Cotula et al. 2004: 2). In sub-Saharan Africa, most land does not have formal documentation about who owns it or who has the rights to use it (Toulmin 2008: 10, Peters 2013b). In many of the countries, land tenure systems are characterized as either customary (traditional) or state (statutory) in type (Cotula et al. 2004: 2). In the past decades, how-

ever, substantial efforts in terms of policy have been geared towards eradicating customary systems aimed at replacing them with private land tenure system. For instance, land titling has been widely advocated for many of the countries.

Such moves have also been widely questioned in the sense that the absence of individualization of land rights in Africa does not necessarily represent tenure insecurity. Dozens of studies (e.g., Mafeje 1993, Place and Hazell 1993, Bruce and Migot-Adholla 1994, Platteau 1996, Quan 2000) indicate that customary land tenure systems in Africa do not necessarily imply tenure insecurity. Against the arguments of many governments and donors towards replacing customary land tenure systems by individual ones, many studies pointed to the dynamic and flexible nature of such systems. Bruce (1993) and Migot-Adholla et al. (1991) argued that African indigenous (customary) tenure systems have been flexible and responsive to changes in economic situations indicating that in places where, for example, there was population pressure and agricultural commercialization, such systems have evolved to individualized systems (Migot-Adholla et al. 1991, Bruce 1993, Bruce and Migot-Adholla 1994), but this would possibly entail counter-productive outcomes (Platteau 1996). It is also the case that "formalization offers little assurance that beneficial outcomes are inevitable" (Bromley 2008: 20). The proponent of land titling have now recognized that it may not always be the most appropriate one (Deininger and Binswanger 1999, Deininger 2003, Deininger and Feder 2009), as "more simple measures to enhance tenure security can make a big difference at much lower cost than formal titles" (Deininger 2003: 39). For instance, Deininger and Feder (2009: 233) make the concluding point that the "formalization of land rights should not be viewed as a panacea and that interventions should be decided only after a careful diagnosis of the policy, social, and governance environment".

Nonetheless, while the absence of private land tenure systems does not mean tenure insecurity, it does not necessarily follow that enhanced security of tenure would result in increased agricultural production and environmental management as it can be argued that other factors are rather more crucial (Bugri 2008, Pagiola 1999, Meinzen-Dick et al. 2002). Hence, a holistic conception of agricultural production and environmental degradations must be brought into the analysis. To this end, a broader analysis of livelihood systems and society-environment interactions should take

center stage rather than simply emphasizing on a single component of the whole system.

3.3 Rural livelihoods and vulnerability: The Ethiopian context

3.3.1 Introduction

While food insecurity persists, Ethiopia has huge untapped potential for enhancing its agricultural production and productivity (Demeke et al. 2004). The country holds large land resources which are potentially suitable for agriculture that can possibly be brought under irrigation, with varied agro-ecological opportunities, and in addition, it has also large livestock resources (Demeke et al. 2004, Asefa and Zegeye 2003).

In spite of its agricultural potential, the country's agricultural sector remained extremely vulnerable to recurrent droughts and fluctuations in output (Demeke et al. 2004, Tolossa 2005a). Droughts have demonstrated an enormous capacity for destruction and the erosion of livelihood resources. Given the fact that most poor households live in rural areas relying primarily on agriculture for their livelihoods, their impacts on livelihoods manifest through decreased production, loss of livestock, soil fertility decline, extreme shortages of drinking water, and increased vulnerability to livelihood insecurity.

In many parts of the Horn of Africa, droughts have been recurring phenomena. In this part of Africa, there has been at least one major drought episode in each decade in the past 30 years (Ramakrishna and Assefa 2002, Tolossa 2005a, IFAD 2006). Unsurprisingly, drought shocks are also pervasive in rural areas of Ethiopia, where more than 40% of rural households experience at least one type of shock affecting their lives (MoFED 2008: 10).[6] Such shocks tend to reduce consumption levels and worsen poverty (Dercon et al. 2005). For example, crop damage and drought shocks raise the likelihood that a rural household is going to be poor by 9.6 and 7.5 percentage points, respectively (MoFED 2008: 10). When crops fail and livestock die, poor households face food shortages as well lose their income and, hence, their livelihood security worsens and restoring lost assets may take many years. Using panel data from rural Ethiopia, for example, Dercon (2004) demonstrates that drought shocks not only have short-term impacts on consumption but also substantial

long-lasting effects in terms of reduced consumption and poverty persistence. He has shown that the drought experienced in 1984-85 can be linked as an explanatory factor for slower growth rates observed in the 1990s. Furthermore, he indicated that it took more than 10 years for households to recover their lost livestock holdings to the levels possessed before the onset of the 1984-85 drought.

Despite the strong performance of the agricultural sector over most of the last decade, the country is still far from realizing its agricultural potential in terms of improving productivity and production. The average growth rate of the agricultural GDP has been about 10% per annum since 1996-97 and this growth rate reached up to 13% per annum since 2004-05 (MoRAD 2010: 3). As rainfall is the single most important source of water for cultivation, it makes rainfed agriculture highly vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather. That is why frequent droughts reverse the gains from agricultural sector performance with devastating effects on household food security and poverty levels (ibid.: 4). Mostly, pastoral livelihoods in the lowlands and densely populated food insecure areas in the highlands are vulnerable to recurrent droughts. Devereux (2000) pointed out that dependence on unreliable and low-productive rainfed subsistence agriculture may well be the principal determining factor for the persisting food insecurity conditions. By considering the case of Ethiopia, a country better endowed with water than most other drought-prone countries, the Human Development Report (UNDP 2006) describes the significant negative impact of the rainfed nature of Ethiopia's agriculture to the entire national economy as follows:

> Ethiopia covers 12 river basins and has just over 1,600 liters of water per person per year. The problem for Ethiopia, where livelihoods for the vast majority of people depend on rain fed agriculture, is uncertainty. Rainfall variability is estimated to have pushed an additional 12 million people below the absolute poverty line in the second half of the 1990s. With more than 80% of the population living in the countryside and half of them undernourished, water holds the key to human development prospects for households. That is why poor people themselves identify variable rainfall as the greatest threat to their livelihoods. But as in other predominantly agricultural countries, failed rains in Ethiopia send shock waves beyond the household and across the entire economy. A single drought event in a 12-year period will lower GDP by 7%-10% and increase poverty by 12%-14%. …the inability to mitigate the effects of rainfall variability reduces Ethiopia's potential

for economic growth by a third – with obvious consequences for reducing poverty. Hydrological variability is estimated to increase poverty levels in 2015 by between a quarter and a third, or some 11 million people (UNDP 2006: 157).

While the country has an irrigable potential of about 4.3 million hectares of land, only about 6% of this potential is currently being utilized (MoARD 2010: 4), reinforcing the above argument.

As argued by some scholars (e.g., Rahmato 2008, Ezra 1990, 2001) the dramatic increase in population pressure has caused far-reaching repercussions on the natural resource base. The country's population was growing rapidly in which it increased by more than 20 million persons just over the period between 1994 and 2007 (CSA 2008).[7] The critical concern here is not so much that population is increasing rapidly but the fact that the vast majority is concentrated in rural areas makes it much more compelling due to its enormous impact on the land resource (Ezra 1990, Rahmato 2008).

A wide-range of factors interact as underlying processes, immediate causes, aggravating factors and consequences with regard to the understanding of complex relationships between population growth, environmental deterioration, and agricultural stagnation (Webb and von Braun 1994). Some of the causal factors operate as underlying processes over a long period of time while others are discrete short-term events. For example, population growth and environmental degradation are considered processes that increase the probability of food shortages in the event of a drought or economic crisis (ibid.). In many agriculture-based economies such as Ethiopia, rapid population growth threatens the environment through farmland expansion into fragile areas and higher demand for natural resources which in turn may lead to a declining trend in per capita agricultural land, forest and water resources. This pressure contributes to land degradation (e.g., Campbell 1991, Ezra 2001, Rahmato 2008). However, this causal relationship cannot be taken for granted, and this long established orthodoxy has been challenged. Some empirical studies from sub-Saharan Africa demonstrated the intensification of agriculture and improvements in the environment amidst population growth (Tiffen et al. 1994,[8] Turner et al. 1993, Gray and Kevane 2001).[9][10] For that, the relationship between population growth and environment has been viewed as one of intensification and not necessarily of increasing land degradation. Nonetheless, the prior belief that links population growth as one of the key causal factors to environmental degradation persists.

As many (e.g., Rahmato 2008, Alemu 1999, Gebreselassie 2006, Tolossa 2005a) would argue, poor policies and poor institutional structures have long limited the growth of the country's agricultural sector and, thus, are considered as the major causes of agricultural stagnation. Agriculture in different countries suffered from discriminatory policies, which were growth-constraining (Kiros 1993, Haile Gabriel 2000, Alemu 2002). Some of the commonly known unfavorable policies include overvalued exchange rates, industrial protection and export taxation on agriculture. In addition, the support provided to the agricultural sector in terms of subsidized inputs, credit, infrastructure, research and extension services were very limited compared to the surplus extracted from agriculture itself. Even those supports almost exclusively privileged and often went to large-scale modern farms rather than to the majority of smallholders.

The Ethiopian experience represents a typical case that pursued policies that had persistently and heavily discriminated against its agricultural sector in general and small-scale peasant farming in particular, especially during the previous regimes of the Imperial era (before 1974) and the Derg period (from 1974-1991) (Cohen and Weintraub 1975, Kiros 1993, Haile Gabriel 2000, Alemu 2002, Rahmato 2009). During the Imperial period, primacy was given to the industrial sector rather than to agriculture, which was influenced by the then popular argument for import-substitution. Agriculture was meant to play an instrumental role in providing the resources required for the industrialization process. For this to happen, policies favored large-scale commercial farms more than small-scale peasant farming within the agricultural sector, resulting in peasant agriculture lacking capital investment, technical support and extension services (Aredo 1990). In addition, the feudal land tenure systems had allowed the concentration of land in the hands of few absentee landlords, which made possible the excessive exploitation of the tenants.

After the 1974 revolution, the Derg regime on the basis of a socialist ideology again favored the industrial sector over the agricultural sector. Within the agricultural sector, large-scale state farms were favored over small-scale peasant farming. Such discrimination was justified with a Leninist ideology that regarded subsistence peasant farming and organization as 'undesirable' and, hence, the peasant sector was considered as 'stagnant' and isolated from the 'modern' sector (Alemu 1999). The peasants were conceived as dysfunctional to the entire economy since – as was argued –

land resources that could be used by mechanized state farms more efficiently were controlled by this small farm sector. Aredo (1990: 53) concludes that past policies were characterized by various types of biases against agriculture in general and small peasant farming in particular, such as scale and technological bias (i.e., preferential treatment of large farms) and spatial bias (reflecting the concentration of modern farm inputs and extension services in limited areas). In general, during the previous regimes, the agricultural sector was regarded as a sector that has to be constantly squeezed to generate a surplus to be financed into the industrial sector.

However, decades of neglect of agriculture made the sector neither to fulfill its major functions of providing adequate food to both rural and urban populations nor provide sufficient resources required for an industrialization process. Instead, this centuries'-old sector remained underdeveloped and unable to feed its own population who have relied on it for their living. As a result, the sector continues to crawl and became the main source of vulnerability of overall national economy.

In contrast to the Imperial and Derg regimes, the current government that took power in 1991 placed more emphasis on smallholder farming with the overarching objective that rapid agricultural growth, driven mainly by smallholders, is the key for structural transformation of the economy. Through its Agricultural-Development Led Industrialization (ADLI) strategy, the focus was to provide peasant farmers with appropriate agricultural technologies and improved farming practices to enable them achieve increased productivity and output (Rahmato 2008). Some of the major components of this strategy include: provision of improved agricultural inputs to smallholders, and of small-scale irrigation schemes, improving the livestock sector, promotion of environmental protection and natural resource management, liberalizing and stimulating output markets, expansion of rural infrastructure, raising women's participation and implementation of a 'just' land policy (ibid.). Significant effects of this strategy have been observed in many respects such as growth in agricultural output. However, it has not yielded the expected results in ensuring food security of smallholders and thus the challenges of food security and rural poverty have persisted. Critics have pointed out that the government's strategy based on smallholder agriculture as the engine of economic growth is facing complex challenges, particularly related to the structure

of landholdings among the majority smallholders (Nega et al. 2003, Rahmato 2008, Gebreselassie 2006).

One of the key issues that has drawn attention was the degree to which the size of landholdings can adequately support the livelihoods of rural households. For example, a study by Nega et al. (2003:121) indicated that problems faced by agriculture were very much related to landholding patterns. They indicated that lower per capita food production and farm incomes are directly related to the declining size of landholdings. Their argument is that extremely small-sized farms cannot be made productive even with improved modern technology. Similarly, some others also suggested that "average landholdings would be insufficient to feed a family of 5 even if production could be successfully increased three times with the use of improved technology" (Masefield 2000: 4, see also Demeke 1999, Negatu 2005, Gebreselassie 2006, Nega et al. 2003, Rahmato 2008).[11]

Institutional structures, in addition to policies, may have great impact on the performance of agriculture. Land tenure systems are critical institutional factors that affect the performance of agricultural sector. In this regard, many scholars argued that the land tenure system in Ethiopia has remained highly insecure, which in turn influenced agrarian transformation and conservation of natural resources (Alemu 1999, Admassie 2000, Ellis 2006, Bewket 2007, Rahmato 2009).

Smallholder commercialisation and large-scale land investment

Since 2005, Ethiopia has emphasised the commercialisation of agriculture and expansion of private sector participation to accelerate growth and poverty eradication.[12] Its consecutive five-year development plans (particularly PASDEP and GTP)[13] pursued a spatially differentiated strategy of promoting smallholder commercialisation but also large-scale commercial agriculture (MoFED 2010). On the one hand, focus has been placed on enhancing smallholders' role in intensified production of marketable agricultural products across much of the highlands, and on private sector investment in floriculture and horticulture, mainly in the surrounding highland areas close to major urban centres.[14] The objective here is to enable smallholder farmers to gradually shift from subsistence low-productivity agriculture to market-driven production of high-value products, in order to increase their incomes. On the other hand, a strong push for extensive large-scale commercial agriculture undertaken by private investors is made

in lowland peripheral areas in which abundant "unoccupied" or "unused" land is claimed to exist (MoFED 2010).

Implicit in this strategy to maintain smallholders in the historically "core" highland areas is the aim to highlight their political significance for the current regime, which must continue supporting the smallholder sector for its existence (Lavers 2012a, Makki 2012). At the same time, policymakers are increasingly aware that Ethiopian agriculture at its present state cannot provide the considerable outlays of capital required for the industrial investments that the country needs to transform its national economy, and for that reason a strong push for large-scale mechanised agriculture in the lowlands is favoured. Added to these, the government seems to have gradually come to terms with the incontrovertible fact of persisting food insecurity and rural vulnerability, which demonstrated the lack of progress in two decades of agricultural strategy of distinct character (Markakis 2011, Lavers 2012a).[15] Thus, the recent surge in leasing large tracts of agricultural land, mainly in the lowlands, is a strategy to generate greater foreign exchange earnings. The government has been keen to promote and back private sector investment in land resources when the latter are capable in producing agricultural products primarily for export. By the end of the GTP period (2015) the government aimed to generate a total of USD 6.58 billion from the agricultural export market. For this to materialise, over the same period an estimated 3.3 million hectares of land (in addition to land already allotted before the GTP) was to be transferred to large-scale agricultural investors (MoFED 2010: 48-49).

Recent figures from the government's annual progress report on GTP implementation show that, during the 2012/2013 fiscal year about 3.31 million hectares of large-scale investment land was identified and transferred to the federal land bank (MoFED 2014: 38). Nevertheless, over the last three GTP years, a total of not more than 473,000 hectares of land was transferred to investors, of which only 11% was reportedly developed by these investors (MoFED 2014: 38). It appears that the plan has not worked out in the way it was designed, as the land actually transferred to investors (and the proportion of land developed) was far below the GTP plan to lease 3.3 million hectares by 2015. Among the major factors that have resulted in low performance, the government pointed to delay in the participation of investors and limited capacity to develop all the land transferred to them (MoFED 2013, 2014).

Recognition of the importance of land as a key strategic resource has led the government to set up a centralised institutional structure for controlling the administration of land that is earmarked for agricultural investment. For this purpose, the Ministry of Agriculture has been given overall responsibility, within which the Agricultural Investment Support Directorate (AISD) was established in 2009.[16] More specifically, AISD has been created to administer agricultural investment lands, and thus to transfer such lands to all foreign investors as well as to large domestic investors requesting lands measuring 5,000 hectares or more. To this end, agricultural investment lands identified by regional states were transferred into a centralised pool called the Federal Land Bank, to be administered by AISD.[17]

Evidence from various sources indicates that the state and profit-seeking local elites (such as domestic investors and members of the Ethiopian diaspora) have undertaken most of the land investments, though the involvement of foreign investors has also been significant (Oakland Institute 2011, Rahmato 2011). However, foreign investors often lease large blocks of land when compared with domestic investors (both public and private). In addition, the state itself is directly engaged in the acquisition of big chunks of land, especially for state-run sugar plantations.

While foreign investors aim for profits, the strong political commitment and push from the government centres on the likely development impacts that would be achieved from large-scale investments in land resources (MoFED 2010, Rahmato 2011). However, widespread concerns have been raised over the possible adverse consequences of large-scale agricultural land acquisitions for the subaltern groups, particularly for poor, marginalised and vulnerable rural groups, putting into question such optimism (Rahmato 2011, Shete 2011, Fisseha 2011, Lavers 2012b, Moreda 2015, Shete and Rutten 2015).

Overview of land tenure in Ethiopia

The viability of peasants as producers, to a large extent, relates to their access to and control over productive land resources (see also Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009). Wolde-Mariam (1986: 76) describes this in such a way that "for the Ethiopian peasant in the past, land was as invaluable as life itself". He further explains that land was not only the basis of life for peasants in the material sense but also basis for the claim of respectability and

identity.Under the conditions of persistent vulnerabilities to food insecurity, severe land degradation and land shortage, it would be essential to provide security of tenure (Alemu 1999, Gebremedhin and Swinton 2003, Tolossa 2005a, Bogale et al. 2006, Gebreselassie 2006, Rahmato 2009a). In this regard, Borras et al. (2007) generally stressed that rural poor people's effective control over productive land is crucial for a viable rural livelihood and in order to overcome poverty.

Though it is not the intention of this section to provide a detailed historical account of land tenure arrangements in Ethiopia, it is necessary to give at least a brief overview of the complex land tenure systems over the last three regimes.

During the Imperial regime before 1974, Ethiopia was believed to have land tenure arrangements described as one of the most complex collections of different land use systems in Africa (Cohen and Weintraub 1975, Crewett et al. 2008, Rahmato 1984). This complex land tenure system was commonly distinguished as communal (*rist*), grant land (*gult*), freehold or sometimes referred to as private (*gebbar* tenures), church (*samon*), and state (*maderia*) tenure regimes. The system generally encouraged the concentration of land in the hands of absentee landlords and was characterized as feudal (Rahmato 1984, Brüne 1990). The land tenure system of the Imperial period was generally characterized by the eviction of a large number of peasants (especially in the southern parts of the country where tenancy prevailed), great inequality and high tenure insecurity. The cumulative effect of these issues had been regarded as the most important cause of the political grievances that eventually led to the overthrow of the regime (Adal 2001, wa Githinji and Mersha 2007, Rahmato 2009).

After the 1974 revolution deposed the Imperial regime, the socialist military government (the Derg regime) that took power under the Proclamation No. 31/1975 eliminated any kind of private ownership of land and transferred ownership of rural land to the state for distribution to peasants through local Peasant Associations (PAs). Organized by these Peasant Associations, frequent land redistributions were undertaken among households. The transfer of land by sale, lease or mortgage was declared illegal and anyone willing to engage in farming was to be allocated land. The land ceiling was 10 hectares per household. During the Derg regime, rights to land came to be usufruct rights. Consequently, tenancy or the hiring of labour for cultivation was formally abolished but the restriction was waived particularly for landholders who were disabled, widowed, women

and children without caregivers. Similarly, the restriction on land transfer was also lifted in the case of inheriting to heirs although this required permission from the Peasant Association. Access to land was, however, conditional on proven permanent residency in that specific locality and absence from their land at least during peak agricultural seasons would entail the loss of their rights to land thereby hindering rural out-migration (Rahmato 1984, Brüne 1990, Pausewang 1990, Rahmato 2009a).

Rahmato (2009a), in his brief review of the radical rural reforms of the Derg regime, stressed the failure of the reform from the stand point of secure rights to land while acknowledging some of its achievements. He further argued that the agrarian reform of the time replaced the landlords by the state with hegemonic power over the peasantry.

Following the overthrow of the military government in 1991, several reforms were introduced, but despite many changes in various respects compared to the previous regimes, the land policy of the new government remained similar to that of the previous military government, as all land remained state property. Enacted in 1994, the federal constitution of the present government illustrates the right of every Ethiopian citizen who aspires to engage in farming to receive a piece of land. The 2005 Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation ensures this right as follows: "Any citizen of the country who is 18 years of age or above and wants to engage in agriculture for a living shall have the right to use rural land" (FDRE 2005, Proclamation No. 456, Section 5, 1b). Access to land is thus a constitutional right for anyone who wishes to engage in agriculture. However, peasants have only use rights, and the right to land ownership is exclusively vested in the state. In spite of these features, the current land policy allows limited forms of land transfers such as through inheritance and renting, although some regions impose specific conditions on such transfers. Rahmato (2009a) teases out several factors that have added to tenure insecurity among landholders under the current regime, underscoring the authority given to different government offices at various levels to intervene in land related matters. In this case, government actors including Development Agents (DAs)[18], *kebele* council and other local officials have been given responsibilities over the allocation and management of land, and consequently, they can make decisions that may threaten the rights of individual's access to land. The Federal law (FDRE 2005) also gives additional power to local authorities to alienate and expropriate land if they see the land more useful for public or private investment.

In order to contain the growing criticism of the government's failure to provide robust tenure security, land registration and certification has been introduced although the question whether these efforts have led to greater tenure security remains debated (Rahmato 2009).

Understanding the links: land tenure and land degradation

This section examines whether land tenure insecurity has been linked to the problem of land degradation in Ethiopia and how are the links conceptualized in the context of state ownership of land in the country.

One of the serious environmental problems threatening the viability of agriculture in Ethiopia is land degradation in terms of severe soil erosion and nutrient depletion. This problem manifests itself in declining land productivity, which ultimately undermines the overall growth of agriculture. This, in turn, has far-reaching effects on the development and poverty reduction efforts of the country. The government of Ethiopia acknowledged the seriousness of land degradation and its potential to weaken poverty reduction endeavors and the prospect for sustainable development (MoFED 2010). The government underscored the urgent need to deal with land degradation and poverty reduction simultaneously as they are mutually reinforcing issues and this was widely discussed in its five-year development plan of 2010/11- 2015 (MoFED 2010).

In the case of Ethiopia, land tenure insecurity has been mentioned as a constraint to agricultural growth and land conservation (Admassie 2000, Gebremedhin and Swinton 2003, Rahmato 2008). For instance, Deininger and Jin (2006) pointed out that the problem of land tenure insecurity is high in the country relative to other African countries.

There have been several empirical studies conducted in different parts of rural Ethiopia looking at the relationship between land tenure security and resource conservation practices. A study by Gebremedhin and Swinton (2003) examined the factors that drive the decisions of farmers in land conservation in northern Ethiopia. They found out that those decisions were influenced by land tenure security. Particularly, long-term conservation investments in stone terraces were positively influenced by security of tenure and the capacity to invest. They concluded that secure and stable rights to land would promote long-term investments that may require even costly undertakings but are essential to reverse land degradation problems. Although their study showed the importance of secure property rights in

encouraging land conservation practices, it did not explicitly indicate whether land tenure insecurity was a problem in that particular study area.

Rahmato (2009a), who has been writing extensively on land issues in the country, argues that under the current state ownership of land, tenure insecurity is deemed high, in which all peasants remained 'tenants'[19] of the state. Therefore, he attributes the lack of long-term investments towards land conservation to the existence of a high degree of land tenure insecurity in the country. The state-society interaction has been on the basis of asymmetrical power and property relations, the state having hegemonic control over land resources and redefining property rights to land.

In the context of the ongoing land tenure debate in the country, the impact of land redistributions have been mentioned in relation to productivity and the perception of farmers towards tenure security and incentives to land conservation investments. Benin and Pender (2001) found that the land redistribution that was conducted in the Amhara region had a positive impact on the productivity of land by improving access to farmland for landless farmers. On the other hand, they indicated that almost all farmers in their study area expect future land redistributions which tended to be related to prevalent landlessness.

In another study, Alemu (1999) noted that insecurity of tenure negatively affects farmers' investment decisions on physical soil conservation structures which, in turn, influence land productivity. The study stressed that land redistribution practices were among the main sources of uncertainty in the tenure system and this implied that current land users might not be certain about whether benefits from their investment will accrue to them in the future. Nevertheless, a study in southern Ethiopia by Holden and Yohannes (2002) examined the impact of land redistribution on households' perceptions of tenure security and how this might affect the use of purchased farm inputs and planting of trees. The study revealed no evidence of a negative impact on the intensity of input use and planting of trees associated with the perceived land tenure insecurity though 17% of the households in their study feared losing their land in the future. Instead, they pointed out that intensification of production and investments in trees were constrained due to resource poverty. Alternatively, investments in tree planting were considered as a strategy in order to secure land rights. Deininger and Jin (2006), although strong defenders of the private property-more investment thesis, also found out that planting of trees may be

undertaken not always for its impact on productivity but as a way to increase tenure security and contribute to reducing the chance of losing their land in the future. These above findings appear to be consistent with the findings of some studies in other countries on 'reverse causality' in which investments in land could be made in order to enhance security of tenure (Sjaastad and Bromley 1997, Place and Otsuka 2002, Gray 2003, Wannasai and Shrestha 2008).

In contrast, Benin (2006) found that many of the land management practices were less likely to be undertaken in areas where there had been previous experiences of land redistribution and the main reason for the low likelihood to engage in land management was associated with tenure insecurity.

Many scholars (Rahmato 2009, Gebreselassie 2006, Admassie 2000) hold the existing land tenure system responsible, directly or indirectly, for the country's structural problems of the agricultural sector. Some of these problems include shrinking farm size, high degree of farm fragmentation, land scarcity, environmental degradation, lack of land conservation investments and low productivity. The availability of land determines the type of farm practices pursued and may also affect the process of land degradation. Because of high population pressure in rural areas, farmland is becoming scarce and resulted in diminishing farm size in which about 40% of landholders possess a farm size of 0.5 hectare or less; while those rural households that cultivated less than one hectare accounted for 64.5% (Negatu 2005). The implication is that farmers may tend to put intense pressure on the land by using it to the maximum which could lead to land degradation as fallows are abandoned due to land shortages. In addition, there has been high level of farm fragmentation associated with the constrained availability of land due to high population pressure and in the highlands the average farm size was found to be fragmented into 2.3 plots which each measured 0.35 hectares (Gebreselassie 2006).

Some literature indicates that land fragmentation hinders intensification of agriculture by smallholders and generally discourages land conservation efforts. For instance, fragmentation and diminution of farmlands could negatively affect sustainable land management practices such as agro-forestry, crop rotation, inter-cropping and soil conservation (Gebreselassie 2006) while others contend fragmentation would enable farmers to diversify risks and take advantage of varied soil types and micro-climatic variations for crop cultivation (Solomon 2004).

Critics argue that the current land tenure system contributed to the continued existence of high population pressure on rural land that resulted in shrinking farm size and further fragmentation of farm plots. This is because the tenurial system discourages long-term rural out-migration to other areas in search of non-farm employment opportunities as people are constrained from selling out their land and they may risk losing their land if they leave their land uncultivated for some time (Ellis 2006, Gebreselassie 2006, Rahmato 2008).

Land tenure, livelihoods and conflict

Scarcity of environmental resources such as cropland, water and forests, not only because of degradation, but also because of absolute shortage in relation to the growing demand, could contribute to violence and hence may cause social stress within countries. Such social stress particularly affects developing countries as they are highly dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods (Homer-Dixon 1999), in which access to and allocation of resources is affected by property rights (Fernandez 2006).

A clearly defined land tenure system enables to address disputes and conflicts over resources that could possibly undermine rural livelihoods (Bogale et al. 2006, Rahmato 2009a). A secure land tenure system does not necessarily refer to private property but needs to be clearly defined and understood so that issues of how and who should use the resources address the sources of disputes and thus, current land users would be assured that they will be more likely to benefit from their investments. It can be drawn that resource scarcities were never the only or main causes of poverty, conflicts and other problems. Rather other factors such as economic, social and political factors also play important roles (Homer-Dixon 1999). Interestingly, in the contexts of limited non-agricultural income generating opportunities in many rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa, land-related intergenerational and inter-sibling conflicts are likely to rise when the rural youth have to rely on land to make a living (see Peters 2002, 2013b, Peters and Kambewa 2007, Nyambara 2001, Quan 2007).

Several studies in different parts of Ethiopia have indicated the linkage between resource degradation and conflicts and how the lack of secure property rights contributed to the problem. One case study for such linkage comes from Bogale et al. (2006) in eastern Ethiopia that reported incidences of scarcity-induced conflicts with adverse consequences for the

livelihoods of households and, hence, resulted in increased household vulnerability to food insecurity. They documented that 18% of farm plots of sample households' encountered conflicts ranging from simple disputes between individual farmers to conflicts among communities and peasant associations. The study identified the lack of clearly defined property rights accountable for the conflicts and also for overexploitation of the hillsides leading to degradation and perpetuation of poverty. Similarly, Beyene (2009) examined inter-ethnic conflict among pastoralists and agro-pastoral societies over grazing land which was previously accessed as common property in eastern Ethiopia. The study identified factors that have contributed to frequent conflicts which include land-use change, resource scarcity, violation of customary norms, power imbalance and livestock raids. Tafesse (2007) also noted inter-ethnic conflict between migrant Amhara settlers and local Oromo communities over resources in east Wollega zone due to a multitude of factors including environmental degradation. When resources become scarce as a result of various factors such as environmental degradation, population pressure and unequal resource access, poor people will be pushed to ecologically marginal lands such as hillsides and lowlands with harsh environments. This was evidenced by Tafesse (2007) that resource poor people from certain parts of Amhara region migrated to east Wollega zone of Oromiya region and settled in the lowlands in most cases avoided by the local Oromo communities because of malaria prevalence and the harsh climate.

The high levels of tenure insecurity in the country were also evidenced by Deininger and Jin (2006) in which 23% of households in their survey mentioned land conflict with local government authorities. In another study in the Amhara region, this figure rose to 35% where respondents had experienced land disputes over the last 10 years (Solomon 2004). Another striking result was uncovered by Rahmato (2009b). His finding indicated that land-related disputes were high in both Dessie Zuria and Wollaita *woredas* although the number of such disputes declined after land registration. Most frequently indicated causes for such disputes include conflicts over boundaries, divorce, inheritance, blocking paths, tree planting on boundary lines, and crop damage. He concluded that all these disputes and conflicts over land "reveal profound insecurities about basic livelihoods and property rights, insecurities which have been aggravated by growing rural poverty, population pressure, and scarcity of land, and limited opportunities for alternative sources of income" (ibid.: 86-87).

Overall, the theoretical and empirical materials consulted seem to show the lack of dynamism in the land tenurial arrangements, falling short to respond to the growing population pressure and other factors that lie at the root of land degradation problems and land-related conflicts. The understanding of land tenure systems is thus essential since it is critical in determining how people access to and control over land resources. Especially, it has been among the key factors that affect the livelihoods of poor people either reducing or increasing their vulnerability. While the role of tenure security is underscored, this study argues for a broader approach to the issue of ensuring security of tenure, as one in which linking tenure security with a particular form of land tenure would be misleading. What is more important – and needs more emphasis – is the linking of land rights (not limited to the legal sphere, but moving towards actual and perceived land tenure security) and the empowerment of rural people. The political and legal empowerment of rural people and their organizations is critical to improve and strengthen their capacity to continue accessing and managing land and other productive resources efficiently and sustainably. This will more likely strengthen their ability to negotiate, claim, and retain their rights on land resources, as well as their ability to practice effective control over them. This necessitates changes in power relationships "within society, within the state and between state and society" (Fox 2007: 335). The next section provides a discussion of some of the key issues of the livelihood diversification literature with an attempt to make connections with land access and land tenure arrangements.

3.3.2 Livelihood diversification

A substantial body of literature demonstrates that rural households in Africa often engage in diversified livelihood activities (e.g., Bryceson 1999, 2000, Ellis 2000, Reardon 1998, Reardon et al. 2000, Barrett et al. 2000). Here, the concept of livelihood diversification is defined as "the process by which rural households construct an increasingly diverse portfolio of activities and assets in order to survive and to improve their standard of living" (Ellis 2000: 15).[20] Households engage in a diverse array of livelihood activities in order to generate income from a wide-range of sources such as farm, off-farm, and non-farm activities (Ellis 2000).[21] This literature has demonstrated that a considerable share of household income in rural areas is generated from a diversified portfolio of activities. For example, a large-scale survey undertaken in six African countries during

1996-98[22] showed that non-farm activities contribute a "remarkable" amount of reaching 60-80% of rural household income (Bryceson 2002a: 730).[23] Thus, livelihood diversification is an important strategy for ensuring household livelihood security. Several studies (e.g., Barrett et al. 2001, Ellis and Freeman 2004) furthermore reveal positive correlation between incomes generated from non-farm activities and overall household income per capita.

There are multiple reasons for why households diversify their livelihood sources. The literature on diversification tends to classify these reasons as "push" and "pull" factors (e.g., Barrett et al. 2001, Ellis 2000b, Bryceson 2000). Push factors are generally related to inadequate returns obtained from agriculture due to declining farm size, declining productivity, and decreased land access and climatic variations. Here, risk and seasonality associated with agriculture-based livelihoods were given as reasons for diversifying (Ellis 2006). There are also pull factors that encourage involvement in diversified non-farm activities with the view that non-farm employment opportunities offer higher returns than farming. Such factors include the expansion of large commercial farms, proximity to urban areas, expansion of rural labour markets and the availability of credit services. In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, Bryceson (2000) argues that push factors have been dominant for the diversification of livelihoods into non-farm activities as farmers face a declining trend in productivity and increasing demands for cash to pay for school and health expenses as well as for consumer goods. From this it is implied that the move towards livelihood diversification in sub-Saharan Africa is associated with agriculture's failure to provide adequate means of living to rural people (Bryceson 2002a). Despite this, there has been vast body of literature which argues that rural poverty reduction depends on rapid growth in agriculture and growth linkages in rural non-farm sectors (e.g., Delgado et al. 1998, Reardon 2001, McPherson 2001, Mwabu and Thorbecke 2004).

There is variation regarding the characteristics of diversification between the poor and better off households (Reardon et al. 2000, Barrett et al. 2000, Ellis 2006). Poor households often tend to diversify in activities with low marginal returns as they lack the required initial resources such as financial, social and human capital to engage in higher return non-farm activities. As a result, such poor and vulnerable households mostly depend on agriculture and seasonal wage activities, whereas better-off households

tend to engage mostly in higher return non-farm diversified activities, as they can be able to meet the capital needed to engage in these activities.

This seems to contradict with the argument that livelihood diversification offers an effective pathway out of poverty and in reducing the vulnerability of the poor. Diversification is a strategy for coping, adaptation, or accumulation (Ellis 2000). These different roles of diversification have been observed in which poor households diversify in order to survive while accumulation being for the better off. Despite increasing recognition of the contribution of diversification as a coping strategy for the poor, less is known as regards to how households with fewer initial resources to diversify use this as a strategy that would lead to accumulation for investment purposes which will have long-term benefits lifting them out of persisting poverty.

The contribution of livelihood diversification to rural livelihoods is also evident in Ethiopia as is the case throughout sub-Saharan Africa, although relatively few studies have shown the precise contribution of diversification to livelihoods in rural Ethiopia (e.g., Carswell 2002, Tolossa 2005a, Devereux et al. 2003). The typical rural livelihood diversification activities in the country, as evidenced in various areas, combine crop and livestock agriculture, off-farm income generating activities (e.g. casual labor, seasonal migration and engaging in food-for-work programs) and non-farm activities (such as petty trading). Carswell (2002) argues that some of these activities have long been practiced and contends not a new phenomenon although they were in some way 'hidden' from view.

In recent years, however, it has been recognized that livelihood diversification plays vital roles in rural livelihoods although there remains a greater need for the detail understanding of its dynamics. In this respect, Belaineh (2002) argues that while the contribution of rural livelihoods diversification is often ignored in policy terms,[24] it is an important feature of 'survival' in rural areas in the country. He found different groups in the eastern highlands pursuing widely variant objectives and, these groups have various and dynamic perspectives in diversifying their livelihood. He concluded that the misconception of rural development focused on enhancing the productivity of agriculture needs to be re-examined, and emphasized food security as only one of the central concerns of households but not the only one.

Similarly, research findings on livelihood diversification from southern Ethiopia showed that diversification activities are critical to livelihoods in

the study region. This research also outlined some of the key determinants of diversification operating at different scales which includes household size, gender of household head, wealth status, ownership and access to assets and access to transport, markets and services (Carswell et al. 2000).

Devereux et al. (2003), however, argued that the contribution of earnings from off-farm and non-farm activities to household income in rural Ethiopia has been much lower than other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In this regard, in their destitution study in rural Wollo, they found that the available off-farm livelihood activities were limited in terms of scale which were mostly very low-return, and almost entirely dependent on the limited local demand. The demand for such activities is greatly determined by the success or failure of agriculture which is typically rain-fed (ibid.: 163). This tends to constrain the availability and income-generating potential of off-farm activities. They concluded that "while the existing off-farm activities have played an important role in enabling people to survive in 'sub-subsistence agriculture' for many years,…..on the whole they offer little potential for significant reduction of vulnerability or poverty" (ibid.: 164) unless new opportunities, that will increase returns to labour, decrease dependence on the rains, and add value to agricultural products, are made available and strengthened. Their conclusion seems to be consistent with the argument (e.g., Reardon et al. 2000) that such activities pursued by the poor represents a kind of 'survival' strategy rather than a way out of poverty.

Tolossa (2005a) has found the main discouraging factors that constrain the expansion of non-farm income earning activities in Oromiya zone that could undermine their role for poverty reduction. These include notably the lack of initial financial capital, limited knowledge and skills, lack of raw materials, and limited markets. Empirical evidence from Dercon and Krishnan (1996) demonstrates that many poor households cannot engage in livelihood diversification sufficiently since most of the high return activities both in agriculture (e.g., intensification) and non-agricultural activities (e.g., business) are often restricted to those households with adequate access to resources.

While increased diversification of livelihoods corresponds with higher income, such a benefit mostly accrues to better-off households as they are the ones who are able to invest in high-return activities and, hence, receive greater incomes (Barrett et al. 2001). However, a study in southern Ethiopia (Carswell 2002) showed that the proportion of income derived from

off-farm and non-farm activities were found to be higher for poorer households, claiming that such activities provide vital support to the livelihoods of the poor as well.

Another study conducted in north Wollo confirmed that households depend on different survival mechanisms to respond to recurrent food insecurity and famine crises. These mechanisms include crop diversification, relying on wild fruits, selling livestock, participating in food-for-work programmes, migration, and other coping mechanisms of female-headed households such as renting of land, working as daily laborers, preparing drinks, selling firewood and dung, and child labour (Ramakrishna and Assefa 2002). Consistently, another rural livelihoods study conducted on cases from Kersa and Babile *woredas* in eastern Highlands, found that food crop sales are very rare events for households in the study areas (Belaineh 2002). The study revealed that there are only very few better-off farmers who can sell food crops as a true surplus over home consumption though the poorer households are also forced to sell some part of their harvest. In addition, it identified the most important sources of cash income which includes '*khat*' production, groundnut production, sales of livestock, distress sales of food grains, sales of livestock products and by-products, petty trading, firewood and charcoal sales and casual labour (ibid.).

While research demonstrated that diversification contributes as a survival strategy and to reduce rural poverty, so far there is a gap in understanding the dynamics of how land tenure systems encourage or inhibit the diversification of livelihoods into farm, off-farm and non-farm activities (Ellis and Allison 2004: 16). Understandably, insecurity of tenure tends to hamper households' ability to deploy their land resources to make the best use of it for improving their livelihoods. In that case, households may not be able to respond flexibly to diversification options and opportunities as these prospects will be predicated by security of tenure. Ellis and Allison (2004: 12) conclude that "diversification improves livelihoods, and to the extent that it fails to do so, this can often be traced to adverse institutional environments that penalize people on the move", particularly land tenure institutions.

Although some implicit references were noted from the foregoing discussions of the dynamics of diversification, much of the literature on livelihood diversification does not explicitly discuss the interrelationship between land access and diversification. Important issues with respect to the role of land access to the diversification of livelihoods and, in turn, how

diversification could contribute to enhance access to land and to the improvement of land quality are inadequately explored. In addition, the literature is mostly silent on the impact of involvement in diversified livelihood activities on land conservation.

This present study will therefore look at these gaps to understand the dynamics between land access and diversification as land continues to be the most critical resource to rural livelihoods, and also examine how land-constrained households struggle to construct diversified livelihoods.

3.3.3 Land-migration nexus and its generational dimension

In Ethiopia, the poor and food insecure generally have a limited economic resource base with few options and prospects for increasing their incomes through farm, off-farm or non-farm activities. Almost total dependence on rain-fed agriculture makes them vulnerable to any external shock, such as drought and floods. The opportunities for diversification within agriculture depend mostly on access to productive resources such as land, financial services and access to markets.

Rural households generally try to construct diversified livelihoods within the context of available resources and opportunities. Dominant household livelihood strategies in rural Ethiopia generally fall under Scoones' (1998) categories such as agricultural intensification and extensification; income diversification; and migration (either temporary or permanent). Whenever households' survival is at stake, they may even opt for very risky strategies as the ones that maximize their chance of survival. One common coping strategy for population facing long-term poverty, conflict and detrimental changes in environment is migration (Yintso 2001, Ezra 2001, Tafesse 2007, Mberu 2006). Earlier theoretically models viewed migration decisions directly linked to the optimizing behavior of individuals (Todaro 1969, 1976). Nowadays, however, migration has been conceived as part of household livelihood strategy, rather than simply an individual decision, in which the household spreads risks and improve its livelihood (e.g., Lauby and Stark 1988, Stark 1991). Households engage in seasonal migration in order to derive some income to supplement their inadequate agricultural harvests and, hence, reduce vulnerability to shocks. In addition, Tafesse (2007) asserts that peasants may engage in permanent migration as a last resort when all other coping strategies fail. Although it has been argued that migration is mainly a household livelihood strategy in which members of the household decide collectively, there have been

changes in the way such decisions are made. In many rural areas in Ethopia, for example, as land shortage has become critical, migration has been becoming individuals' own decision, especially for the rural youth (see Chapter 4).

Migration is thus not only a significant livelihood strategy for poor rural households, but is also a major source of livelihood for the rural youth as access to land has become increasingly difficult in many rural areas (Bezu and Holden 2014, see also Berckmoes and White 2014 in the case of rural Burundi, Sumberg et al. 2012). However, its role in sustaining or moving out of poverty is largely determined by the social, cultural, political, geographical and economic circumstances experienced by the poor (Kothari 2002, de Haan and Rogaly 2002, Tafesse 2007). Kothari (2002) further states that migration plays an essential role in livelihood strategies of the poor and occurs in response to a wide range of factors that affect people differently. Studies in the country have demonstrated that various push and pull factors have been behind out-migration in rural areas. A study conducted by Tafesse (2007) revealed a number of causes for forced migration including those with a physical- environmental characteristics (recurrent drought, rainfall scarcity, land and soil degradation, land scarcity and soil fertility decline), and socio-economic and political factors (social differentiation, weak institutional systems, greater exposure to risks, increasing vulnerability and entitlement failures). He also demonstrated the pull factors that have possibly attracted migrants to his study area in east Wollega zone which include the availability of uninhabited fertile land and the suitability of the climatic condition for human and livestock population, migratory networks, and the opening up of a new road in the area.

Similarly, Ezra (2001) illustrates that rural out-migration in northern Ethiopia has been undertaken as a response to push factors that are related to ecological degradation and poverty in rural areas, and he indicates that these factors were the major causes of out-migration rather than the pull factors in urban areas. A recent study by Asfaw et al. (2010) has also indicated the major factors that drive rural people to migrate seasonally including shortage of farmland, indebtedness, and low and inadequate income from farming.

It has been generally assumed that the poor with limited assets tend to engage more in migration in search of wage employment. However, this 'poverty-migration' nexus cannot be put in a cut and dried way, as the

determinants, processes as well as the impacts of migration are more complex and context-specific which may be difficult to generalize and, hence, poverty may not necessarily be the main reason behind migration (de Haan 2000: 15). For instance, the study by Asfaw et al. (2010) provide mixed results regarding the relation between out-migration and asset status of households, differing from one study *woreda* to another. In some of their study *woredas,* they indicated that it was the landless and those members of poor households who migrated for seasonal wage employment rather than the better-off while both the poor and the better-off practiced it in some other *woredas*. Similarly, Devereux et al. (2003: 123) found that non-destitute households were almost twice as likely as destitute households to involve their members in labour migration because of the initial investment needed to migrate.

Despite this, one obvious way to cope with a shortfall in income from agriculture or other self-employment activities in rural Ethiopia is to search for wage employment. For instance, Sen (1981) already indicated how household heads, particularly male heads, abandon their village and family in search of wage employment when hit by drought. This case has also been clearly evidenced in a recent study in Amhara region in which male household heads with labour strength seasonally migrated to Metemma and Humera to work as daily laborers in sesame, cotton and groundnut commercial farms (Asfaw et al. 2010, see also Chapter 4).

Tafesse (2007) also affirms that seasonal labour migration is a common practice by peasants during the slack farming season in order to augment their household income. He further states that seasonal migration is undertaken as a coping strategy to reduce their household size temporarily (to reduce their household food consumption) as well as to earn and remit money from the income they obtain by engaging in farm and off-farm activities. He describes seasonal migration as the norm in rural Ethiopia rather than the exception, in which migrants return home during peak farming activities, strengthening the argument that seasonal migration is one of the common coping strategies.

Devereux et al. (2003) stated that seasonal migration is undertaken by peasants even in normal times in order to diversify their livelihoods. In this regard, a success in migration is likely to enable success in another livelihood strategy. For instance, an individual who migrates successfully and maintains contact with the home area is likely to invest back home such as through the purchase of livestock, which are to be kept by family

members. Nonetheless, they did not show whether seasonal migration could help in raising the productivity of the traditional subsistence agriculture beyond simply filling seasonal gaps in income and food security.

The problem in rural Ethiopia in relation to migration, particularly permanent migration, is that the extent of landlessness or near-landlessness is increasing and thus, there is little or no spare arable land that can accommodate the rural youth and their new households looking for land. However, land pressure appears worse in some areas than others and many farming households and the youth would certainly move to places where there is spare land if possible. But as some observers (Devereux et al. 2003, Gebreselassie 2006) have pointed out the problem related to rigid institutional and administrative barriers such as ethnically-based regionalization and land tenure insecurity appear to constrain mobility although some resettlement schemes were undertaken within regions.

Tafesse (2007) in his book "*The Migration, Environment and Conflict Nexus in Ethiopia*" clearly indicated the need for mechanisms by which the government's devolution of power to the existing nine regional states based on ethnicity should no longer be used to promote political agendas after he identified various factors that have triggered inter-ethnic conflicts which eventually led to the displacement of thousands of migrant settlers in his study area. Despite this evidence associated with long-term migration, Devereux et al. (2003: 94), found no evidence that ethnic federalization had been a barrier to labour migration between regions in northeastern part of the country. Instead, they noted the perception of migrants that "one of the changes they [migrants] have seen in the past decade is an increase in freedom to travel, along with increased numbers of people looking for migrant employment."

Although migration, especially seasonal labour migration, has been one of the important constituents of livelihood diversification and coping strategies in rural areas, it has been viewed in pejorative terms especially in the policy arena. One of the justifications given by the government for the continued state ownership of land is that it prevents distress sale of land by the poor and, hence, controls excessive out-migration of rural people. While the limited literature makes passing references, less is known with regards to the links between migration and livelihoods such as the extent to which migration is pursued as a livelihood strategy initiated by the lack of access to land and vulnerability of livelihoods; and the virtuous or ad-

verse impacts on individual migrants, household and community livelihoods. In addition, it is unclear how and to what extent remittances from migration are invested in the invigoration of farming. Still the empirical literature is patchy in showing how far migration, often combined by subsistence farming, has become an accumulation strategy. Interestingly, there is limited analysis of the implications of severe land access constraints in contemporary rural Ethiopia for the youth and its link with their livelihood choice. Although there is a growing narrative that young people are becoming increasingly disinterested in farming (Tadele and Gella 2012), such a narrative often overlooks the critical challenges that the rural youth face, especially in terms of getting access to land, even if they want to engage in farming (White 2012). As demonstrated in chapter 4, young rural people migrate in response to strong push factors such as lack of land access, lack of non-farm livelihood opportunities or increasing socio-economic pressures. While the increasing difficulty in getting access to land by the rural youth particularly in the highland regions of the country could be mainly because of population-induced land scarcity, the same may be happening to the younger generation in the lowland areas due to ongoing large-scale acquisition of land resources by corporate actors.

3.4 Conclusions

Without aiming at completeness, this chapter reviewed important theoretical and empirical literature on poverty, land and vulnerability nexus in rural sub-Saharan Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular. Rural poverty has been pervasive throughout the region and its causes are numerous that have continued to emerge and transform over historical processes and contemporary contexts. The literature shows that ensuring food security remains one of the major predicaments of many sub-Saharan African countries since the region continued as the only part of the world in which the number of food insecure population is steadily increasing. Against this backdrop, concerted efforts need to be put in place to rejuvenate agriculture and the rural sector due to its broad-based role in economic growth, poverty reduction and food security.

Empirical literature, from sub-Saharan Africa as well as elsewhere, has revealed the importance of small-scale agriculture to overall growth and poverty reduction. The consulted body of literature made clear that small-scale farming for agriculture plays a central role in economic growth and

poverty reduction. Promotion of smallholder agriculture is not only desirable because of its far-reaching implications for poverty reduction, but also for its potential to achieve both growth and equity goals at the same time; and has the potential to ensure food security, political stability, and environmental management. What is more compelling is that the vast majority of farmers in sub-Saharan Africa are smallholders and they constitute many of the rural poor. It is in this sense that smallholder agriculture may be viewed as indispensable through which the role of agriculture for poverty reduction can be realized. By and large, rising land acquisitions for large-scale corporate agriculture poses threats to the future of smallholders as they are the ones at risk of losing their land and, hence, this trend may have far-reaching consequences for their livelihoods.

As is the case in many sub-Saharan African countries, the challenges of poverty and food insecurity have recurred in Ethiopia linked to persistent vulnerabilities of rural households. The persistence of such challenges in many rural areas is due to a multitude of complex factors. Per capita land availability, which is a critical asset, is diminishing as a result of a combination of factors such as population pressure and lack of alternative non-farm employment opportunities, and land degradation.

The literature reviewed shows that the lack of tenure security contributes to land degradation and has implications for land conservation and agricultural productivity. The review explored the ways by which land tenure security influenced the perceptions of people in their decisions to invest on land conservation practices. The conclusion is that tenure insecurity seems to undermine conservation and sustainable utilization of land resources. Thus, tenure insecurity may have played a detrimental role in land degradation, and in the context of state-society interactions, in which the state has hegemonic power relations over land, there is growing fear of future possible land redistribution mainly attributed to growing landlessness. In addition, the recent ongoing large-scale acquisitions may add further apprehension among smallholders regarding whether they will use their land on a continual basis (see Chapters 7 and 8). This sense of insecurity has negative connotations for the perceptions of peasants towards long-term land conservation endeavors. The review also revealed that causality may run in the reverse direction in which land-users undertake certain land-based investments as tenure-building strategy. Given the critical role of land for the livelihoods of rural population, detrimental processes

such as growing pressure on the land resource may eventually escalate insecurity of tenure and consequently, result in land degradation and land-related conflicts. Notwithstanding this, the notion of tenure insecurity dominates the literature disproportionately attributing it as the main driver for land degradation while downplaying other non-tenurial factors. In this respect, one key issue that also needs attention is the influence of poverty in undermining land conservation as well as the influence of broad political economic and ecological factors in explaining land degradation. In this study, however, I argue that while tenure insecurity has been an important factor, it has often been used as 'a convenient scapegoat' for land degradation in the country. Instead of putting all the blame on the lack of tenure security, the study also considers other non-tenurial factors and processes as equally important for environmental degradation (see Chapter 6).

Although the literature gives adequate evidence of the need for secure land tenure systems in order to address land degradation, increase productivity and avoid land-related conflicts, it does not clearly suggest a particular type of property rights regime that would offer benefits in the context of rural Ethiopia. Whatever the type may be however; what remains important is secure land tenure systems in which rural land users that live on the land have the access and control over it as a viable way of reversing land degradation and, hence, to enhance their livelihoods.

The livelihood diversification literature also tends to be almost silent about the links between land tenure institutions and diversification. It has emphasized the tenure security-land conservation nexus and hardly focused on how security of tenure affects diversification and broad livelihoods. As part of diverse livelihood strategies, migration is also pursued as a response to resource scarcity such as declining access to land. Thus, the connections between these factors and the role that migration plays in relation to vulnerability need to be examined more closely (see Chapter 4). Finally, this review of pertinent literature provides and lays the ground for an improved understanding of the topics being investigated in this study.

Notes

[1] The recent return to using agriculture for development does not simply reflect its long-established role in launching structural transformations through triggering industrialization but goes beyond this, introducing "a new paradigm" shift regarding its far-reaching implications which includes growth, reducing poverty, reducing income disparities, food security and environmental services (Byerlee et al. 2009: 28).

Despite this, some critics who have examined the World Development Report 2008 on agriculture, given its powerful role in shaping and influencing development policies in many developing countries, pointed out that the report is "not a paradigm-shifting reimagining of the policy and practice of rural development" (Akram-Lodhi 2008: 1147).

[2] These countries include Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and Zambia.

[3] Despite its significant role in reducing poverty (e.g., Hazell and Ramasamy 1991, Lipton and Longhurst 1989, Rosegrant and Hazell 2000, Hazell 2002), it has been pointed that the Green Revolution resulted in increased income inequality, inequitable distribution of assets, and environmental degradation (e.g., Pearse 1980). It brought about an increase in yields, raise in income and reduction in food prices and, hence, more consumption but with social and ecological costs. It has been blamed for causing environmental damage due to the associated excessive application of fertilizers and pesticides which have resulted in adverse impacts to the environment.

[4] To a large extent, large-scale land acquisitions have been made by private companies, sometimes with equity participation of their country governments in the investment projects through state-owned enterprises, development funds or sovereign wealth funds. Governments play major roles in supporting private investments through providing them diplomatic and financial supports (Cotula 2009, HLPE 2011). Despite this, in some countries such as South Korea and the Gulf States (e.g., Saudi Arabia) the state has been taking the leading role in foreign land accumulations (see Visser and Spoor 2011).

[5] Land tenure refers to the social relations and institutions that govern access to and control over land and related resources. It determines who can use the land resources, for how long and under what conditions (Lastarria-Cornhiel 1997: 1317, IFAD 2008: 27). Land tenure systems thus cannot be understood without looking at its "relationship to the economic, political, and social systems which produces it and which it influences" (Bruce 1998: 1).

[6] Shocks, as defined by Dercon et al (2005: 5), are "adverse events that lead to a loss of household income, a reduction in consumption and/ or a loss of productive assets."

[7] While the country still has relatively high rate of population growth, the annual growth rate for the period 1994-2007 decreased by 0.2% from the previous period 1984-1994 i.e., the population grew at an average annual rate of 2.6% between 1994-2007 (CSA 2008).

[8] For example, in their book titled "More People, Less Erosion" Tiffen et al. (1994) examined the relationship between population density, agricultural productivity and environmental degradation in Machakos district of southeast Kenya over the period 1930-1990. They provide convincing evidence that population densities

have indeed increased; agricultural productivity has increased and degraded landscapes have recovered. They argued that although increased population density resulted in land scarcity, it did not lead to environmental degradation. Instead, farmers have engaged in tree planting and other activities that helped the degraded landscapes to flourish. Hence, the increasing population did not lead to unsustainable farming practices.

[9] Note that population was not the only reason that led to agricultural intensification but also changes in other factors such as policy, credit, markets and services (Gray and Kevane 2001: 574, see Turner et al 1993, Tiffen et al. 1994).

[10] Fairhead and Leach (1998) also challenged the common view that considers population growth a culprit to environmental degradation. In their analysis of deforestation in West Africa, they argue that "more people does not necessarily mean less forest" (ibid.: xiv), and stressed on the importance of techniques and practices in local land use and management. They indicated exaggerations in the rate and extent of deforestation and misinterpretations of the processes that lead to deforestation. The implication of such misinterpretations, they argue, was profound in which local people have been blamed for deforestation. Thus, they argue that such analysis rather needs to be approached from a dynamic perspective that considers the role of local population in promoting forests.

[11] According to the 2007 Census, the average rural household size of the Amhara region is 4.5.

[12] Although due attention on both agricultural commercialisation and promotion of the private sector investment was given since the last poverty reduction document (PASDEP), various support and incentive mechanisms to attract foreign direct investment have been put in place since 2002/2003 (see FDRE 2002, 2003), and were amended in 2008 (FDRE 2008).

[13] Under the overarching policy framework of Agricultural Development-Led Industrialisation (ADLI), the country pursued successive poverty reduction strategies: the Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program (SDPRP), the Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty (PASDEP) and the current Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP), which is being implemented from 2010/2011 to 2014/2015.

[14] MoFED (2010) shows that the country has been able to register a success record of increasing export markets for flowers by private investors over the last five-year period. According to a recent government report, a revenue of USD 186.1 million was generated from the export of flowers in 2012/2013 (MoFED 2014: 22). However, this was USD 12.6 million in 2004/2005.

[15] While government sources show that agriculture grew at an average annual rate of 8.4% over the last five years (MoFED 2010: 4), roughly 7–8 million people have

always been chronically food insecure. In 2012/2013, for example, the total number of beneficiaries from the country's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), a key progamme designed for food insecure areas, was 6.89 million (MoFED 2014: 37).

[16] As of 2013, the AISD was reorganized as the Agricultural Investment Land Administration Agency (AILAA) under the Council of Ministers Regulation No. 283/2013.

[17] The Constitution of Ethiopia adopted in 1995 gives regional states the power to administer all land and other natural resources; the recent centralisation into AISD/AILAA is thus contrary to the constitution (Markakis 2011, Lavers 2012b).

[18] These are agriculture and rural development extension workers with responsibilities of crop production, livestock production, natural resource management and home economics.

[19] The word 'tenant' was not used in its full sense.

[20] For a detailed conceptual discussion regarding livelihood diversification, see Ellis (1998, 2000).

[21] It is quite important to understand the distinction between farm, off-farm and non-farm income activities. Farm income generally refers to income generated from household's own farming, and off-farm income refers to wage employment on other farms. Whereas non-farm income typically refers to incomes derived from non-agricultural activities (Ellis 2000).

[22] This was the study by the Deagrarianization and Rural Employment (DARE) research program conducted in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Tanzania, Malawi, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

[23] Also see Reardon (1997) who revealed an increasing share of incomes obtained from non-farm sectors, with an average share of 45% of income, based on the review of evidence from several studies in many sub-Saharan African countries over the period from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s.

[24] However, the need for livelihood diversification into off-farm and non-farm activities has been clearly stated in the rural development policy documents and Food Security Strategy although there seems that agriculture is over-emphasized.

4 Dynamics of access to land and livelihoods in south Gondar zone

4.1 Introduction

The combined effect of diverse factors such as land scarcity, environmental and climate change, population pressure, land acquisitions for industrial agriculture and a rural economy that offers limited opportunities for alternative non-agricultural income generation have increased vulnerability in rural areas. Land remains the most fundamental resource in rural areas across Ethiopia. In the context of rural areas of the country, current understanding of livelihoods places critical emphasis on access to land as almost all rural households are largely dependent on farming as the basis for their livelihoods. Land rights, access to land and land distribution have been fundamental issues in the country's political and agrarian history. This has gone through different trajectories over the last five to six decades, resulting in profound changes in state and class structures and tenure relations (Rahmato 2009). Before the 1974 revolution that deposed the feudal monarchy, the land tenure system was characterized by landlordism in which access to land by peasants was a difficult and complex issue. As a result, the subordination of the peasantry to the landed classes was absolute (Cohen and Weintraub 1975, Markakis 1974, Rahmato 1984, Tareke 1991). The 1974 revolution was a landmark in bringing radical agrarian reforms and abolishing the old feudal system and its exploitative systems of property relations in rural areas. In the following years, land belonging to landlords was expropriated and all land was declared state property (Rahmato 1984, 2009, Mengisteab 1990).

Under the Derg regime, land was distributed among peasants that were organized in Peasant Associations in each *kebele* (ibid.). However, the peasants had only usufruct rights to the land they 'received'. During this period, landless peasants were in fact able to get access to a certain amount of

land. As the reform promised all rural households the right of access to land, this also entailed periodic land redistributions in order to address the demands of new claimants and to promote equity of holdings. Land redistributions were suggested as the only avenue for improving access to land and alleviating the problem of landlessness. Consequently, this practice was generally thought to have brought about the size reduction and fragmentation of landholdings as well as contributing to tenure insecurity (Rahmato 1984, 2009, Alemu 1999). After the overthrow of the Derg regime in 1991, the following (and current) government maintained the land policy that made all land the property of the state though there are a number of changes (Rahmato 2009). The country's current constitution allows regional governments to formulate their regional land laws depending on their particular contexts.

In the Amhara region, the focal point for this part of the study, the last major land redistribution was undertaken in 1997 which had an objective to improve access to land in the region (Ege 1997). After that land redistribution, no further redistributions were made since then, and the current land policy in the region formally prohibits further redistributions in any part of the region, except the possible distribution of irrigable lands (ANRS 2006). The regional land policy however stipulates that redistribution can still be carried out in particular areas on the condition that about 80% of the residents of that area request it (ibid.). Those under 18 years of age during the time of the last land redistribution most likely end up landless when they became adult and try to form their own households, and establish their own farms. With the abolition of the land redistribution policy and due to land scarcity and progressive dwindling of landholding size, it has become increasingly difficult for young households and unmarried young people to gain access to land. Currently, this appears highly problematic for the reason that other alternative sources of livelihoods are not available and if they do exist, are very limited.

Parents usually carve a portion from their land for their children, which means further shrinking landholding size and fragmentation. This way of access to a small plot of land often involves negotiations, and sometimes tensions and conflicts between household members. Since it is a dynamic process in which more and more young people continue to demand rights to land access, the mechanisms available for meeting the needs of those with little or no land are currently limited and thus, rural households con-

tinue to face constrained access to land. There is an ongoing (re)interpretation of the current problems of access to land and existing patterns of small landholdings constrain the process of agrarian change and differentiation in rural areas.

Most recent research on land issues tends to focus on documenting the declining trends in landholding size by demonstrating the amount of land held by individual households at a particular time. As a result, the focus has moved away from the investigation of the means through which land is actually accessed under the prevailing context of land shortages where the available landholdings are both intensively cultivated and often insufficient for household livelihood requirements due to continuing subdivisions. It is argued here that focusing on the dynamics of this issue is of great importance for the understanding of contemporary rural Ethiopia, particularly its predicaments to the youth. In absence of further land redistribution as an alternative channel of access to land, there is a need to understand how rural people gain access to land and how the contemporary politics of land access is shaping, and is shaped by social forces and political economic structures and processes as well as local ecological dynamics. It is by asking questions how these dynamics work that we can be able to understand how rural households, particularly the younger generation, survive in such increasingly stressful economic conditions, as well as realize how narrowed or constrained access to land has become in the present day rural areas. This understanding leads us to explore whether alternative livelihood activities are available or not. What has become clear is that constrained access to land means that the rural youth has to find alternative employment opportunities elsewhere including seasonal labour migration. As outlined in Chapter 3, mostly seasonal labor migrants (who migrate because of "distress push") are indeed either those who have small landholdings or are completely landless.

After this brief introduction, the chapter proceeds to the next section which explores the distribution of landholdings and the means through which land is accessed in the study areas. This is followed by an examination of alternative livelihood activities, particularly the link between land access and seasonal migration. This is with the view to determine whether alternative livelihood activities are available in the light of increasing difficulty in gaining access to land and the overall situation of land scarcity. The last section of the chapter draws a short conclusion.

4.2 Patterns of landholdings and distribution

This section presents findings concerning access to and distribution of land in the south Gondar study areas. In the case of rural Ethiopia, it would not be a mistake to equate rural livelihoods with agricultural livelihoods as non-agricultural rural livelihoods are limited. As our survey indicates, almost all of the sample households had access to some land and were depending on farming for their social reproduction in one way or another. However, this is not to argue that other economic opportunities are absent altogether. Talking of rural livelihoods what comes to the forefront is farming and therefore, land continues to be a principal means of production. Thus any study that wishes to examine livelihoods in rural areas must place particular concern, today, on the evolving complexity and dynamics of land issues. People in the study areas view the meaning and significance of land as a defining criterion of rural life in which owning or having access to land is what defines the options and prospects to continue to live in rural areas. Land is viewed more than just an economic resource that extends to define relationships between and among individuals, households and communities and the state (Rahmato 2009). A farmer in Tach Gayint, for example, views land as:

> Our land means our life. It's the food and drink we take daily. It is the clothe(s) we wear although it is now exhausted. We are farmers and without land, how can we be called farmers? I believe land has all our history and everything in it (20 Sept. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

Despite its significance as a stable basis for rural livelihoods, access to land has become more limited as a result of the growing population that subsists on it. The current pattern of landholding in the study areas is predominantly comprised of smallholdings. The household survey executed for this study from October-December 2012 confirmed that landholdings tend to be small in both study *woredas* though there is a slight difference between them.

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 presents basic information regarding the pattern of land access and distribution. In spite of its size, almost all sampled households in both study *woredas* own a certain amount of land under the existing usufruct land tenure system. The landholding size ranges from 0.5–8.0 *timad* (i.e., 0.13–2.0 hectares), the average size being 2.9 *timad* (0.74 ha) in Tach Gayint. However, the mean landholding size for Fogera increases to 3.9 *timad* (1.0 ha), with a minimum of 0.5 *timad* and 12.0 *timad* being the

maximum size of land held. Landholding patterns within each of the study *kebeles* in both of the *woredas* have particular characteristics. In order to explore such characteristics or variations in landholding, classifications were made for each study area. As indicated in the table below, 70% of the households in Tach Gayint fall in the landholding range between 0.50–3.0 *timad* while 7.2% have greater than 4 *timad* (one hectare). Comparing each study *kebele*, 16.5% of the sampled households in Anseta have more *timad* of land (i.e., larger than 4 *timad*) which is more than in Enjit and Agatt *kebeles*. This difference is because Anseta is a lowland *kebele* where relatively speaking more land can be found, owing to less population density relative to densely populated areas in the highland *kebeles*.

Table 4.1
Distribution of landholdings among households, Tach Gayint woreda.

Landholding size (in *timad*)[a]	Study *Kebele* (% of households)			All households	
	Enjit	Agatt	Anseta	%	Number of households
0.5 – 2.0*	33.7	35.6	31.8	33.8	99
2.1 – 3.0	40.4	37.5	28.2	35.8	105
3.1 – 4.0	22.1	24.0	23.5	23.2	68
Greater than 4.0	3.8	2.9	16.5	7.2	21
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	293

[a] The local measurement unit for landholding is *timad*, which corresponds to the size of land that can be ploughed by a pair of oxen in one day, and it is equivalent to 0.25 hectares.

Note: Smaller plots less than 0.5 were also classified in this category. 7 households had no land.

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

There seems to be greater land size inequality in Fogera as compared to Tach Gayint *woreda*. In Fogera, there are many households (34.3%) who have more than 4 *timad* of land, while 48.5%, in fact, owned between 0.50–3.0 *timad*. The Fogera plain is a seasonally flooded area which was predominantly used as seasonal grazing ground by households living in the surrounding area. Before two decades or so, only cereals such as maize and teff as well as vetch were the main crops cultivated in the plain, in combination with cattle breeding. It was not widely cultivated due to the perception that the land was not suitable for crop cultivation. It was only after

the introduction of rice in the area that the potential of the land for cultivation has been increasingly recognized, and since then there has been an intensified pressure on the available land for cultivation as the adoption of rice gradually spread throughout the area. Despite this, average landholding size in Fogera (3.88 *timad*) is still higher than the average in Tach Gayint (2.94 *timad*).

Table 4.2
Distribution of landholdings among households, Fogera woreda

Land size (*timad*)	Number of Households	Percent of Households (%)
0.5 – 2.0*	59	29.8
2.1 – 3.0	37	18.7
3.1 – 4.0	34	17.2
4.1 – 8.0	61	30.8
> 8.0	7	3.5
All households	198	100.0

Note: Smaller plots less than 0.5 were also classified in this category.
2 households had no land.

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

There is a widespread perception of increasing scarcity of land, implying that the younger generation will either cultivate on increasingly smaller landholdings or end up landless. In order to see whether land distribution varies along with the age of household heads, we gave particular emphasis to this aspect, grouping all sampled household heads on their age. As Table 4.3 shows there is indeed inequality in the distribution of landholdings between age groups. Landholding size is smaller for the younger households in each of the study *woreda*. The difference in mean landholding size between different household head's age groups was tested using one-way analysis of variance. The result shows that there is highly significant variation in landholdings between the age groups ($p = .000$). While there was statistically significant difference in the mean landholding size of the first age group (younger households) from the other age groups, there was no such a significant difference between older households. This data is quite revealing as it shows that access to land is getting constrained over time for the younger households.

Table 4.3
Age of household heads and land owned, Tach Gayint woreda

Age Group	Number of Households	Landholding Size (in *timad*)		P value
		Mean	Standard Dev.	
20-35 years	56	1.9152	0.9549	<0.0001
36-45 years	75	2.7800	0.9838	
46-55 years	87	3.2874	1.1950	
56 and above	75	3.4533	1.0972	
All households	293	2.9377	1.2059	

F Ratio = 26.270 p value =.000

Table 4.4
Household head age groups and their landholding size, Fogera woreda

Age Group	Number of Households	Landholding Size (in *timad*)		P value
		Mean	Standard Dev.	
20-35 years	73	2.8836	1.7431	<0.0001
36-45 years	65	4.3385	2.1049	
46 and above	60	4.6000	2.2147	
All households	198	3.8813	2.1480	

F Ratio = 14.439 p value =.000

There also seems to exist variation in the size of landholdings between *kebeles* situated in different agroecological zones. In the Tach Gayint *woreda*, landholdings are relatively larger in the lowland *kebele* of Anseta than other *kebeles* in the mid-altitude and highland areas. However, this does not necessarily mean that households in the lowland *kebeles* are better off than those in the highlands. Due to recurring droughts and prevalence of crop pests and insects, farmers in the lowlands normally own and cultivate a larger area in order to provide for their household, counteracting possible losses. Qualitative data gathered during the survey reveal that there is also inequality in landholdings among households in the lowlands.

Table 4.5
Fragmentation of holdings and distance to farthest plots

Fragmentation of holdings	Study Area	
	Tach Gayint	Fogera
Number of plots		
Mean	2.53	4.76
Minimum	1	1
Maximum	7	12
Std. Deviation	0.885	2.477
Walking distance between homesteads & farthest plot (in minutes)		
Mean	51	26
Minimum	3	1
Maximum	240	120
Std. Deviation	42.719	18.660

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

Landholding fragmentation has been a common feature in both *woredas*. Households in Tach Gayint owned, on average, 2.53 plots with a maximum of 7 plots as compared to a mean of 4.76 plots and a maximum of 12 plots in Fogera. Virtually in all focus group discussions, regardless of the size of each plot owned, most of the participants preferred fragmented plots rather than a continuous field, as fragmentation is commonly thought to offer different opportunities as well as to spread risks in the face of potential crop failure. Of course soil fertility and overall agronomic potential of fields vary over some distances. One farmer from Abua kokit *kebele* in Fogera explains how:

> Here in our area the nature of the land varies over a short distance. Some places are hilly and some plain and low-lying. When it rains, the soil from hilly areas is easily washed down to the plain and low-lying lands. If only few people are given the low-lying or plain lands, those farmers whose entire land is in the hilly areas will become disadvantaged. And this is clearly unfair. ….That means some farmers cultivate land with a good quality while others work on only poor land. It is better when landholdings are fragmented so that whether land is good or bad, everyone would get or take a piece from each type and this makes every one of us happy or satisfied (5 August 2012, Abua-kokit *kebele*).

Nevertheless some farmers explained that fragmentation of fields requires more time and energy, especially for those households with limited labor. The work burden increases as farms become fragmented and fields spatially dispersed, and the effect in fact depends on whether the plots are located near or far from each other.

While fragmentation of holdings is higher in Fogera, it is somehow offset by the proximity of the fields to homesteads as compared to those in Tach Gayint *woreda*. Households in Tach Gayint walk on average for about 51 minutes to reach to their farthest plot away from their homesteads and the remotest plots even take them up to a maximum of 4 hours. But the mean and maximum walking distance between homesteads and farthest plots is half of that in Fogera (26 minutes and 2 hours).

While land shortage is thought to be an acute problem in the study areas, the survey surprisingly revealed that only nine households were landless. The fact that the landless might be under-represented in the survey can be associated with the issue that several married young adults continue to live under the auspices of their parents within one compound and may not be recognized as independent households. The qualitative study revealed that young people even if they are married generally tend to stay longer than in the past in their parents' household before setting up their own independent household. Participants emphasized that, owing to the increasing overall difficulty of gaining access to land and absence of employment opportunities, today, being married does not necessarily mean that the couples form independent households immediately. Young married men (and single or divorced women) who still live with their parents are therefore not considered heads of the household (*abawera* or *emawera*). It is only when they move out of their parents' household and establish their own that they are regarded as independent households. This condition has created intra-household conflicts, as parents are not able to provide a portion of land to their children, so that those children who have reached the stage of social adulthood can leave their parental household and establish their own independent household. In addition, the average age at first marriage has been increasing in recent times contrary to the tradition of early marriage common in the study areas in the past. An important reflection in here is that since the unit of analysis for the survey is the household, the questionnaire fails short in capturing the phenomenon of landlessness within the household itself, as the survey simply bypassed those young adults within it, who were in fact landless and who would

have established their own household had it not been the problem of access to land.

4.3 Means of access to land

In the old agrarian system of the Imperial regime, although quite diverse and regionally specific, the main tenurial arrangements in the country were 'communal' ownership (the *rist* system), in which access to land was gained through descent from the original holder of land or village (that was through consanguinity), and tenant holdings (sharecropping/tenancy arrangements), in which the *gult*-holding landlords determined the distribution of plots to sharecropping tenants (Rahmato 1984). Under the *rist* system, land was held by a kin or village group in which every member had use rights over the land and consequently, frequent reallocation of land was carried out in order to make sure that every member of the family or village was granted access to land. During the Derg regime, all earlier forms of customary tenure arrangements and formal rights to land were abolished and the power to redefine property rights and access to land was vested in the state. This reform transformed the nature of agrarian relations and agricultural production by abolishing landlordism and tenancy. Rural land was distributed among households through peasant associations in each *kebele* and young people had the right to access a plot of land in their respective *kebeles*.

In Tach Gayint, the majority of sampled households (77.8%) acquired their landholdings mainly through the last land redistribution program while 19.8% and 12.6% of the households gained access through sharing with family/relatives and inheritance, respectively (Table 4.6). Only 2.7% and 0.3% of the households included in the sample acquired their land through allocation by local authorities and through purchase, respectively. However, more than half of the households in Fogera acquired their land through inheritance (54%), followed by access through land redistribution (37.9%) and shared with their family/relatives (26.8%). The remaining 7.1% and 2% of the sampled households acquired through allocation by local authorities and purchase, respectively. Each of these modes of land acquisition is illustrated in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6
Modes of acquisition of land: Tach Gayint and Fogera woreda

Land Access/ownership	Study Area			
	Tach Gayint		Fogera	
	No.	%	No.	%
Households who own farmland	293	(97.7)	198	(99.0)
Modes of land acquisition[a,b]				
Through land redistribution	228	(77.8)	75	(37.9)
Allocation by local authorities	8	(2.7)	14	(7.1)
Shared with family/relatives	58	(19.8)	53	(26.8)
Inheritance	37	(12.6)	107	(54.0)
Purchase	1	(0.3)	4	(2.0)

[a] These figures do not include sharecropped/rented lands as well as lands accessed under common property rights. It only includes lands which are under individual usufruct rights of households.

[b] Column totals of percentages given in parentheses exceed 100 because certain households acquired their landholdings through multiple means.

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

4.3.1 Access through administrative-based land redistribution

While land redistribution was more common in the Amhara region, the period has varied across the region and occurred in many places of the region during different periods. However, the 1997 Amhara land redistribution was the major known redistribution in all parts of the region where previous reforms had not been implemented (Ege 1997, Rahmato 2009). While the last major land redistribution undertaken under the current regime in Tach Gayint was in 1992, it was carried out in Fogera in 1997.

According to my informants, it was the 1992 land redistribution scheme that shaped the land distribution pattern visible today in Tach Gayint. It has been continually reshaped over time by dynamic processes including population pressure. During the redistribution, small plots of land were distributed to individuals measured by a rope. Farmers underscored the use of rope as a tool of measuring land to demonstrate how small the lands allocated to individuals were. Generally, famers expressed that the land they got was small. A farmer in his sixties from Enjit *kebele* explains the situation of measuring land by a rope:

> In our culture it is only a corpse (the dead) which is enshrouded and tied tight with a rope. But the land we are working today are small land plots

> wrapped up and measured with a piece of rope during the land redistribution that occurred in our *woreda*. The land distributed to individual farmers this way was so small that let alone giving two '*Silicha*'(one *silicha* is approximately 30 kgs) of harvest, it does not even give two loads of crop residue-hay (one load is approximately equal to the amount one able-bodied person can carry) for our animals (cattle, goats and sheep) (16 Sept. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

In Fogera, land redistribution had involved the registration of households and their landholdings. Then land was redistributed on the basis of household size. The objective behind this redistribution was that land was illegally held or grabbed by bureaucrats and elects of agricultural cooperatives who were proponents of the Derg regime (see also Ege 1997). Through the land redistribution process, some people were given land that was taken from people who held more land. Concerning some of these people, part of their land was taken as they were bureaucrats (*birokrasi*) of the previous regime and some others were thought to have accumulated more land through different means, and given to landless people. However, some rich households were allowed to maintain a maximum of 12 *timads*. The argument was that those people whose land was cut and taken away and given to other people were those who had snatched or took and cultivated other people's land unfairly using their political power and through corruption. On the other hand, to others, up to 12 *timads* of land was allotted as it was proved to be land, which they accumulated through various legal means, including inheritance. During the following 2003 land title registration program, these people were allowed to keep their 12 *timads* of land. They were often those who were called landlords in the old days as they owned large tracts of land. Despite the big size of land they owned, it was believed that they did not take any land from the poor or any other person unfairly.

However, those people (referred as bureaucrats) who had taken other people's land and cultivated it for personal benefits were forced to give up part of their land and were permitted to retain only four *timads* from their existing landholdings. All the remaining land was then redistributed among those people who did not have any land or used to top-up those households who had very small holdings. It was believed that the land confiscated from ex-bureaucrats of the Derg and land rich peasants could contribute in some way to ease the land shortage problem within rural areas and would reduce landlessness. However, my informants argued that

due to the systematic targeting of ex-bureaucrats of the Derg regime, currently especially children and families of those people called bureaucrats are the ones suffering, as they remained landless. During the time of redistribution, their household size was not taken into account but only the land they held was considered. This in fact deviated from the actual process of registration for redistribution in which all household members and land held by households was registered upon which later redistribution based.

Informants further explained that during the land redistribution process, children of the bureaucrats who were above the age of eighteen were not even registered and thus not allowed to participate in the lottery which was meant to include everybody above the age of eighteen. It was argued that while the redistribution was partly aimed to ensure that everybody has equal rights to land, it systematically discriminated or stigmatized the families of the bureaucrats denying them fair treatment for the reason that their parents held office during the Derg.

In addition, in one of the study *kebeles* of Fogera, that is, Shina *kebele* for example about 200 *timads* of land was taken from the communal land and was distributed among those people who did not have any land in the *kebele*. In other words, 50 hectares of land was given to these people cut from the common grazing land available in the *kebele* during the 1997 land redistribution program.

Discussions held in Shina *kebele* revealed ambiguities that communities still widely discuss about the local politics of land that challenged the legitimacy of the land redistribution (FGDs, December 2012). Some of those farmers who were given land during the land redistribution program have now become landless again as their land is taken away. Participants in the focus group discussion held in Shina *kebele* stressed that there are eighteen women whose land has been confiscated despite they owned and used it since the land redistribution program of 1997. They contend that nobody for sure knows why the land of these women was taken away from them though they still have their land title registration papers. This happened during the process of delineation of common grazing lands by *kebele* and the *woreda* justice improvement task force (*Feteh Mashashaya*). In the process, the land that was distributed to them in 1997 was confiscated as the land was said to be part of the common land. Their land was taken away under this excuse. They were supposed to get a replacement for the land taken away from them but none of them got this. Rather they were

told that the land was illegally held. Despite the fact that these women's land was confiscated, informants stressed that these women became victims of the intensifying inter-village conflict over common lands. The issue was that these women were allotted land not within the village where they live but in the neighboring village. As people from other villages (*gott*) yet found within the same *kebele* argued, the land should not have been taken from their village to be given or distributed to those poor people living in another village. They underlined specifically that the distribution of this land (taken from the grazing land of their village) in 1997 among the landless was a mistake. One official of the *woreda* administration explained the case:

> The accusation at the beginning was concerned with those people who illegally cultivated the common grazing land. These individuals have been using the land they snatched from the common land for so long. Beyond cultivating it, some of them had even built their houses on the very land they took from the communal land on their own right. Unfortunately, the land that women and some men owned and used since the last land redistribution was counted as illegal and wrongly labeled together with the land that was stolen from the common land (6 Dec. 2012, Woreta town).

From the survey, it became clear that most of sample households acquired their land through the land redistribution programs that were undertaken in their respective localities.

4.3.2 Access through inheritance

Land inheritance is also found as another important channel through which access to land has been achieved in both of the study areas. In the post 1997 Amhara region, inheritance has become a key source of land access by which parents have been able to pass on portions of their land to their children (see Table 4.7). After the land redistribution, young people, who were not eligible to benefit from the land distribution because they were not eighteen, seem to have encountered increasing difficulty of gaining access to land. Currently these groups represent those people in rural areas that are the most seriously affected by land shortages and outright landlessness. Today, the main source of land that the youth who aspire to be farmers can hope to get is from their parents which will be transferred as a gift or inheritance (*wurs*) and through land rental and sharecropping arrangements. The implication of this on the local politics of

land is quite severe as will be demonstrated later in this chapter. In addition to the survey results, data for the last five years obtained from district court of Tach Gayint reveal that land transfers through inheritance is substantial and shows a growing trend. As shown in Table 4.7, during the period 2008–2012 there were on average about 938 land inheritance transfer cases per year brought to the attention of the *woreda* court.

Table 4.7
Statistics of land transfer cases through inheritance at woreda court, Tach Gayint

Year	Land transfer cases through inheritance by gender (receiver)		Total cases
	Male	Female	
2008/09	346	236	582
2009/10	712	435	1,147
2010/11	558	424	982
2011/12	628	414	1,042

Source: Tach Gayint *woreda* court, 2012 collected by the author.

In practice, land inheritance takes place commonly in two forms. The first one is when an older person bequeaths his or her land to another person while alive, which is called *yequm wurs*. This is a deal in which elderly people (*aqem dekama*) make an agreement with another person to take care of them for the rest of their lives by cultivating their land, which will later be taken by the caregiver upon the death of the old person. An old man from Enjit *kebele* in Tach Gayint elaborates:

> Let's say there is an old and weak person with no legal successor. This old person has farmland. As the person does not have a child to give him or her the support needed, he/she faces a great difficulty challenging even for survival. As a result, the old person is forced to make an agreement with another person who promises to take care of them until the last minute of their later age. Accordingly, this person in return gets the land of the deceased. Then he takes over this land the same as the government does (23 Sept. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

In circumstances where the landholder dies without making a will to transfer to someone and does not have any family or close relatives, then

the landholding belonging to the deceased will be taken by the government. Put another way, in the absence of individuals that are eligible to inherit the landholding of the deceased either by will or otherwise, such land is considered *ye'mote keda* land and thus will be registered as government land. The second one is the mechanism by which landholding rights are inherited by own family members or other close relatives after the time of the death of the original landholder.

In interviews and discussions, it was emphasized that problems occur more often in their communities related to cases where some parents inherit their land to a person who already has some land while some others with no land are overlooked. Through this way some people get relatively more land added to what they already owned. For the other landless young man the alternative "is waiting till his own parents pass away so that he may inherit the land belonging to his parents" (Informant, 23 Sept. 2012, Enjit *kebele*). Strikingly, another older farmer captures this growing desperation of young people in his village recalling that "it is said that a man made a prayer wishing his parents to die (*yemutulign teblo telemene*). That he prayed and begged that his mother would die, that his father would die too to get their land for himself". Land shortages and increasing landlessness together with the absence of alternative employment opportunities out of agriculture are contributing to such social tensions within rural households. Generally, it appears that after the 1997 land redistribution, land inheritance has been the main channel of gaining access to land (see court cases in Table 4.7), although in most cases the land inherited is getting smaller and smaller.

4.3.3 Sharing with family/relatives

In both of the study areas, parents commonly give a portion of land to their children or other close relatives in order to enable them establish their own households. However, as the majority of the parents from the beginning owned small holdings which they got during the land redistribution program, the size of land that they would give to their children is normally very small and this has been even more challenging as most of the households tend to have many children, in which sooner or later each of them will claim a bit from it. Given this situation, tensions often occur within a household when the demands of each household member cannot be effectively met from the apparently small landholdings. This was what one informant from Agatt *kebele* in Tach Gayint stated:

> As a father I gave a piece of farmland to my eldest son cutting from my own small land. However, this young man complains every time and argues that "father, the land you gave is so small. It is of no use to me at all. It is not big/wide enough to cultivate crop to satisfy even just my food consumption. Let alone my children to sustain on it, it does not suffice at all just for me to survive on it." (23 Dec. 2012, Agatt *kebele*).

Those farmers in the study villages of Tach Gayint in particular stated that it is unlikely that young people will get any land at all except from their parents. And this situation has created anxiety among parents. The following account of a household head in Agatt *kebele* illustrated this situation:

> Honestly speaking, where in the world can land be found if these children claim to have plots of land? My worry is that the government will cut from my land and give it to them as there will be no other choice as a better solution. I have already cut my farm land to pieces and given to my elder son on his request to stand on his own and establish an independent family of his own. And I am sure in not very long future that the younger son will ask me to do a similar thing to him like I did to his elder brother. This worries me very much (22 Dec. 2012, Agatt *kebele*).

Another young man in his early twenties similarly explained:

> For example, if you consider me, I am making a living by cultivating farm land that I received from my father. There is no doubt that my younger brothers will request the same share of land when they grow old enough to establish a family of their own. However, my father by then will not have enough land to give a similar share even to one of my younger brothers let alone to all of them. Therefore, I am always afraid of going away far from my land. I do not believe that it will wait for me if I go somewhere else searching for temporary work (22 Sept. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

The difficulties that households have been facing because of the issue of accessing land appear far more complicated, as the implications have not been confined to the household but extend to the deepening generational tensions and loss of hope. In interviews and discussions, what was emphasized and asserted again and again was that people are being "trapped" in the land that has been getting much smaller and being degraded or even becoming unproductive (see Chapter 6). Nevertheless, all respondents wanted to have land no matter how small it could be. One

informant from Enjit *kebele* metaphorically explains the overall situation as follows:

> Our situation is similar to the situation experienced by a person who tries to cover the whole of his body with a very small piece of cloth while sleeping. His head says, I want to wear, I feel cold. When the man covers his head with the cloth, his feet start scratching for a wearing as the cold freezes. In this manner the whole night will be spent while his head and feet pull the cloth away from each other (*sigafefu*) as they compete to wear that cloth which is not big enough to cover all parts of the person's bodies. Due to the smallness of the cloth, when the foot is not wearing, it tries to take the cloth away from the head. When the head is not wearing, it in its turn does the same. This conflict of interest on the cloth goes on throughout the night. This is exactly what is happening within the family related to land access today (30 Sept. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

Generally, in almost all of my research areas young people are apparently less likely to access land compared with their parents' generation, on the basis of which they can establish independent households.

4.3.4 Land allocations by local authorities

The Amhara Rural Land Administration and Use System Implementation Regulation No. 51/2007 provided for the regulation of the rights of land acquisition and use (ANRS 2007). The authority to administer land is vested in the *kebele* land administration and use committee. The land policy promises that anyone residing in the region who wants to engage in agricultural activities has a right to claim access to land in the regional state. To this end, individuals looking for land are required to apply to their *kebele* administration. The size of landholding that an applicant may acquire will not be less than 0.25 hectares when the plot is cultivated by rain and 0.11 hectares if it is irrigable land. Despite this provision, the proportion of sample households who got land through allocations by the local authorities was small, that is 2.7% and 7.1% in Tach Gayint and Fogera, respectively (Table 4.6).

This indicates that land acquisition through allocations by local authorities has been limited, and this partly demonstrates the shortage of land. The landholdings that belonged to those who died with no eligible persons to inherit (*Yemote keda*) as well as the holdings of government employees

were to some extent distributed to new land seekers. In Fogera, comparatively more people were allocated land by local authorities. This is because of the availability of larger communal grazing lands much more than in any of study villages in Tach Gayint. In the discussions, particularly in Shina *kebele*, a sizable amount of land taken from the available communal grazing land was distributed among a number of people who did not have any land (FGDs, December 2012).

4.3.5 Land rental and sharecropping

In the study areas, there are important local institutional arrangements that have been operating through which individuals and households access to land. Generally, two forms of local institutional arrangements have been identified as additional channels of access to land: sharecropping (*ekul* or *abbel*) and cash rental arrangements. In addition to own landholdings, households also engage in both of these arrangements in order to access land in their localities. About 24% (Tach Gayint) and 17% (Fogera) of the households are reported to have either sharecropped out or rented out at least part of their holdings for various reasons. Rather a high proportion of households in each of the study *woredas* have sharecropped/rented in land from other households. These households account for about 55% of the sampled households in Tach Gayint and 64% in Fogera (Table 4.9). This implies unbalanced proportions between those who leased in and leased out in both of the study areas. This is likely because people may be open about what they rent in and not open about what they rent out, not to be considered rich. The result provides a clear evidence that land rental markets exist in both of the study areas. Tables 4.8 and 4.9 show the participation of households in local land access arrangements and their associated reasons for engaging in them.

Most of the literature from within the Marxist tradition views sharecropping as a particular form of surplus appropriation since it is a relationship between agents with unequal access to the means of production (Pearce 1983, Patnaik 1983). Sharecropping relations were viewed as feudal, pre-capitalist production relations, which would dissolve with the emergence of agrarian capitalism (Pearce 1983, Byres 1983). As one mechanism through which the owners of means of production acquire access to others' labour, it also implies access to means of production by tenants. But the extent and degree of inequality in the ownership of the means of production and/or labour power upon which sharecropping relations are

based determine the position of one party relative to the other (Pearce 1983).

Table 4.8
Incidence of sharecropping out/rental arrangements

Land arrangement (leased out)	Study Area			
	Tach Gayint		Fogera	
	No.	%	No.	%
Household has sharecrop out/rented out land	70	(23.9)	34	(17.2)
Reasons for sharecropping/renting out land				
Lack of draught power (oxen)	51	(72.9)	21	(61.8)
Lack of seed/ inputs	46	(65.7)	6	(17.6)
Because of elderly/ old age	7	(10.0)	8	(23.5)
Health problem	12	(17.1)	8	(23.5)
Availability of extra land	-		1	(2.9)
Lack of labour	38	(54.3)	13	(38.2)
Remoteness of farmland	7	(10.0)	2	(5.9)

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

In contemporary rural Ethiopia, peasant households and individuals enter a sharecropping arrangement usually with fellow villagers. The arrangement involves peasant landholders whose landholdings exceed what they can cultivate using the available labour in their households or those who lack labour as well as those individuals and households with no or insufficient land of their own. The common sharecropping arrangement found in the study areas is *ye'ekul* i.e., equal sharing of harvest and all other crop residues (straw) between landholder and the cultivator. In interviews and discussions, those people who have been cultivating land belonging to others through existing sharecropping arrangements indicated that the system has become expensive and exploitative. The landowner makes no contribution of labour and other inputs but shares not only half of the harvest but also crop residuals as well. The understanding is that the prevailing land shortages pushed up the value of land and thus land poor individuals and households could not negotiate a better deal for themselves. However, a careful interpretation of the evidence in the field indicates that the practice is not actually exploitative as both parties involved

in sharecropping arrangements are mostly poor, lacking for instance farmland, labour or other inputs. Under such circumstances, it appears difficult to determine who gains more from the practice. Households tend to sharecrop out or rent out a portion or the whole of their landholdings when they encounter labour shortages and/or shortages of farm inputs and amenities. In Tach Gayint, nearly three-quarters of the households that had engaged in leasing out their land in the past one year preceding the survey indicated the lack of draft power (oxen) as the reason for doing so, followed by lack of seed/inputs (65.7%) or labour (54.3%). In the case of Fogera, 62% of the households who had leased out their land reported lack of draught power, 38% lack of labour, 24% old age, while 24% indicated health problems (Table 4.8). Furthermore, the majority of the households (88% in Tach Gayint; 91% in Fogera) that reported leasing of land indicated that own holding was too small to provide a subsistence level for their household (Table 4.9). Only 3% of the households in each of the study areas indicated a need to make more income from land lease (ibid.). It is important to note that leasing in land does not appear as a means of accumulation by households to rise above the general condition of households in the area. Although both sharecropping and fixed-rental arrangements were identified, sharecropping was the predominant type used by the households in each of the study areas. More than 90% of the households who have reported participation in local land access arrangements have entered their contractual agreement on the basis of sharecropping. Of the 127 households who leased in land in Fogera, 23 households or 18% accessed it through fixed-rental arrangements, as compared to only 1.2% in Tach Gayint although 166 households (55.3%) have reported leasing in land (Table 4.9).

This variation in terms of preference of arrangement types between the two districts has possibly something to do with the spatial variation in land quality and risk factors associated with crop failure. In this case households in Tach Gayint predominantly preferred sharecropping arrangements rather than fixed-rental arrangements, as it is a drought-prone area with a risk of crop failure. Nonetheless those in Fogera engaged in both sharecropping and fixed-rental arrangement though sharecropping is still prevalent. In this regard, the majority of sampled households (93%) in Tach Gayint, for instance, indicated that crop failure was one of the main challenges they faced in the area while this was reported by 49% of the

households in Fogera. In addition to recurring droughts, farmers perceive soil fertility decline on cultivated lands (Chapter 6).

Table 4.9
Household participation in leasing in land

Land arrangement (leased in)	Study Area			
	Tach Gayint		Fogera	
Household has sharecropped in/rented in land	166	(55.3)	127	(63.5)
Reasons for sharecropping in/ renting in land				
Lack of land/ landlessness	36	(21.7)	17	(13.4)
Availability of surplus labour in the household	34	(20.5)	18	(14.2)
Because own landholding is too small	146	(88.0)	116	(91.3)
A need to make more income	5	(3.0)	4	(3.1)
Type of arrangement				
Sharecropping	165	(99.4)	117	(92.1)
Rent	2	(1.2)	23	(18.1)
Land size accessed through sharecropping /rent (in *timad*)[a]				
Mean	2.08		1.91	
Minimum	0.5		0.25	
Maximum	6.0		8.0	
Std. Deviation	1.25		1.27	

Note: Figures given in parentheses are percent.
Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

In a focus group discussion held in Enjit kebele (Tach Gayint), participants explained some of the ecological dynamics (shocks) of their area:

> If you take our land, for example, nature was not generous towards it. Our challenge is that the land is not giving us good yield. Rain falls early/in time or stops raining at the middle thus the crops die….as soon as the plants start growing. Moreover, our crops are often washed away by floods. As you can see, we do not have much plain land. When it rains at the top of mountains (Amba Ras), it immediately turns to flood that washes away all our hard work. We have tried to resist this flood through terracing and other ways. However, we could not yet control it. It is still taking away our food. There are also various harmful insects and pests that feed on the crops that we do. There is this beast – a small insect – they call it '*gomed*'. It means the de-

stroyer. It eats away just the head of the crop. Similarly, there are other insects and pests known as '*Degeza*', '*Tibtiba*' and '*Fentir*' which are the enemies of any crop (7 Oct. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

The above account partly explains the reasons why fixed rental arrangements were not so much practiced in Tach Gayint as compared to the case in Fogera. Another important explanation is that farmers of Tach Gayint mostly do not cultivate cash crops. Cereals represent the commonly grown crops, usually for subsistence. The recent trend in Fogera, however, is that crops including rice, vetch and vegetables (tomato and onion) are widely cultivated for the market in addition to own consumption and these crops have become a major source of cash. There has been a growing demand for these crops in nearby towns, and farmers strive to use these market opportunities through cultivating the crops widely. Given the agronomic potential of the area, cash crop farming brought farmers of Fogera into the cash nexus which in turn enabled them to afford renting land through fixed rental arrangements. Furthermore, 67% of the sampled households in Fogera indicated that they use irrigation on at least one of their plots but only 6% of the households in Tach Gayint reported using irrigation. This suggests that crop failure risks associated with rainfall irregularity decreases in the case of Fogera.

When it comes to fixed cash rental arrangements, this is carried out through paying cash money, one *timad* of land in Fogera is being rented for a minimum of birr 3,000.[1] Of course, this depends on the quality of the land, as fertility and productivity of the land matters. The highest rents are for irrigable lands such as land close to streams or wetlands, which can be cultivated in the dry season as well. For example, if the land is cultivable through small-scale irrigation, the price may reach up to birr 6,000 per *timad*. Otherwise, if the land is cultivable using rain water (rain-fed), a person gets it paying birr 3,000–4,000 in rent. This amount of money is normally paid just for one year. It does not matter if the person who has taken the land for rent cultivates and harvests from it one or three times a year. In case of sharecropping arrangement, locally referred as *abbel*, this is a local arrangement where a person cultivates other persons' land with the understanding that he or she agrees to share each and every piece of the harvest equally with the owner of the land.

Despite the importance of these forms of access to land, due to increasing scarcity of land, the terms and conditions of these arrangements have been changing over time. In both of the study *woredas*, those people

seeking to gain access to a plot of land through existing land rental arrangements must now put upfront some money to the landowners in order to secure their promise that they will be able to cultivate it. For instance, if a person wants to cultivate another person's land in *abbel*, it is has now become a tradition that he has to give or pay some money to the owner of the land in advance as a prior condition. This emerging practice is locally referred as *ye'chogogit*. It is after this money is paid to the owner that the *abbel* agreement is made. The owners are given this money before the cultivation of the *abbel* land, and then they also take their share of the harvest or the produce that is exactly equal to the share that the person who cultivates the land takes. In this case the amount of money paid as *ye'chogogit* depends on the type and quality of the land that is to be given for *abbel*. If the land is fertile and productive, birr 400 to 600 is paid for a *timad* of land in Fogera, and up to birr 250 is paid in Tach Gayint. This is a payment that is simply made to the owner at the beginning to encourage or make the owner not to give the land to another person. It will neither be counted in the *abbel* deal that the two persons are going to equally share the harvest, nor be returned later. These two persons weigh and divide even the remaining straw (*geleba*) and take equal share each, while the additional payment is simply to secure that promise of the landowner becomes effective. Similarly, in certain villages, especially close to towns, access to a plot of land through local arrangements has become more competitive. This is happening because some people from nearby towns started competing with rural dwellers particularly to gain access to land via cash rental contracts. A 27-year-old landless farmer from Abua Kokit *kebele* in Fogera describes the situation:

> For example, take my own case. I am a landless farmer. I got one and half *timads* of land through rental from someone that I know in the village. I took good care of and cultivated it last year. However, I may not cultivate it this year. The reason is that as it is not very far from the town (Woreta), a person who is living in the town is continuously lobbying the owner of the land to get it for rent. He offered the owner much more money than I can do. When the landholder goes to the town for different reasons especially during market days, this town person tries to bribe him such as by buying drinks. I am worried that this person might take it winning the bid and cultivate it himself or someone to cultivate it for him. Why is this happening? Or what is really happening here? This town dweller has more money than I have. I need the land more than he needs it. However, he can even provide five times more money in the bidding than I can provide with all my effort as it is my last

> chance to keep the land. The bid on the land leaves me lost for words as the town man easily wins and takes it. This is part of the challenges that people like me are struggling with these days (16 Dec. 2012, Abua kokit *kebele*).

Another farmer from Enjit *kebele* in Tach Gayint makes similar points:

> Some people, who do not feel ashamed to say that they are civil servants, find land through rental from farmers, and sometimes when the farmers are in difficulty, through lending them some money and other times, through paying some money… which we call *ye'chegogot*. People with money and those who are government workers living in urban areas pay to other farmers who are strong enough and have oxen to cultivate for them (14 Oct. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

Despite this competition, both land arrangements that were discussed above are increasingly restricted to relatives and close friends. In all study villages in both *woredas*, farmers indicated that they would not rent out their land to others but predominantly restrict this to close relatives. This is viewed as a strategy of helping each other in the context of growing scarcity of land. In other words, even if a person owns oxen through which he/she can cultivate renting a land in *abbel*, nowadays, land rental is being given based on kinship line and other connections. The ultimate effect of these changes is that access to land through local arrangements has become practiced in more restrictive ways as land became scarce, excluding those people, who do not have wider social and economic connections, from such means of land access.

Sharecropping and rental claims are negotiated today between parents and children. Parents do not always give a portion of their land to children as own landholdings are increasingly smaller to provide for themselves. Instead of giving them right away, parents often make strategic decisions by which they sharecrop out their land to their sons as a means of enabling their children access to land and at the same time benefit from it for themselves, while maintaining control over the land. One of the frequently mentioned justifications relates to land scarcity in that restricting such local contractual arrangements will enable family members to help each other in the face of increasing demands for it. The other reason is associated with the lack of 'trust' that is developing within the community, resulting in less sharecropped or rented out land to fellow villagers.[2] One farmer in Fogera, for instance, explained how he was once involved in

conflict with a person who had rented his land for three years. While cultivating the land under rental arrangement for those years, this person tried to make the land title registered in his name by bribing local land committee members. When the landholder found out that his land was also registered by the person who had been cultivating it, he took the case to court. In the end he was able to get it back.

The foregoing discussions have demonstrated the general conditions of growing difficulty in gaining access to land. The effect of the general scarcity of land has been resulting in various changes in the rural societies, including changes in the terms of marriage. In the study areas, for example, women's access to land has been increasingly becoming a contingent to marriage. Without land women could not think to get a husband. In the past, a girl was not expected to have a certain amount of land in her name to be considered worthy to marry her. An elderly man from Shina *kebele* in Fogera explained several points regarding these changes (Box 4.1).

Box 4.1 illustrates how the terms of marriage have been changing owing to the problem of land shortage. Moreover, this situation in turn leads to marriage to be confined among people living within the same village. As the couples are supposed to come together with some land from both sides, these parcels of land could not practically be located in different villages. It is interesting to note here that the growing demand for land, by both men and women, in settings of decreasing land availability has certainly brought changes to the longstanding patriarchal institutions of land inheritance and allocation in the study area that usually allowed women's access to land through marriage. As data from the *woreda* court shows (Table 4.7), there was a considerable proportion of land inheritance transfer cases claimed by women.

Box 4.1
Changing terms of marriage as related to access to land – Fogera
(Interview with an eldely man in Shina kebele, Fogera woreda)

In the old days, there was no such a thing that a man asks whether the girl he is hoping to marry owns land or not. Rather it was her beauty and personality that was taken into account. The question whether she owns some land was not even thought and said out loud. But these days, what is being said is that …if you [the father of the girl] are going to give him [young man] some land, let me bring you a husband to your daughter. Of course, the father would not let his daughter to spend the rest of her life alone without a husband. Her father has no better choice except giving her some land, it could be half *timad* or one *timad* or more. It depends on how big is the holding of her father. Otherwise, despite how beautiful, skillful, well-mannered a girl could be, nobody is willing to marry her as long as her father does not give some land. It is true….. even if she has all the beauty, she will be left alone to lead a lonely life holding down her head out of disgrace or dishonor for being *quomo qer* (i.e., woman who remained unmarried). In the past, there was more land than we were able to cultivate and even used simply as open grazing fields because of seasonal flooding of the area in which the water stayed there. It is very recently that we realized how fertile and productive this land is only after the introduction of rice and since then land became scarce….there is not as much spare land as there used to be. In those old days, the father of the young man simply goes to ask the father of the girl whom his son is wishing to marry, proposing 'your daughter to my son'. It was the father of the young man who usually gives a parcel of land to the young couple. But now both parts of the couple should come with some land to get married. A landless man even can get a wife because he is needed at least for his labour. In some cases where a landless woman has already got married, the husband picks a fight saying that 'you did not come to me with any land of your own. Now, go and get your share of land from your parents.' Sometimes this is used as an excuse for divorcing her. In general, land is very decisive but there is a great deal of its scarcity (9 Dec. 2012, Shina *kebele*).

4.4 Land access and livelihood activities

In rural Ethiopia, households face risks and uncertainties arising from the type and nature of their livelihoods. This partly relates to the fact that rural livelihoods are predominantly dependent on a single source of income, namely from agriculture. As a result, diversifying the source of household income has been argued as a strategy to reduce inherent risks and improve livelihoods. Whenever there is a growing difficulty in gaining access to land or held small size of landholdings, individuals and households tend towards looking for alternative sources of income. This is particularly disconcerting in the context of the study areas where alternative livelihood opportunities remain very limited.

Some scholars challenged the role of land in livelihoods arguing that non-farm activities are now central to rural livelihoods in many developing countries and asserted that access to land could no longer be viewed as a necessary condition in rural economies and livelihoods (Ellis 2000, Ellis and Mode 2003, Ellis and Harris 2004: 15, Rigg 2006: 10). However, in the context of rural Ethiopia and the study areas in particular, it is argued here that land continues to play a critical role in rural livelihoods. However, due to the phenomenon of declining landholding size and shortage of land and other related factors, land-based livelihoods alone often cannot sustain households, even in normal or good years. This state of affairs has driven rural households to diversify their livelihoods in the form of engaging in off-farm and non-farm livelihood activities. This trend does not necessarily imply that the central role of land has been diminishing, as those households who even have small plot of land that cannot provide enough for the household do not commonly leave their land entirely and engage on non-farm activities. Instead they strive to top up their incomes through engaging in various activities. But this needs a reality check regarding to what extent rural households are relying on off-farm and non-farm livelihood activities. Indeed, population pressure and recurring drought conditions tend to undermine households' confidence in farming, land remains central and seen as the only "safety net" for the overwhelming majority of rural people regardless of its size and quality. As one farmer from Enjit *kebele* in Tach Gayint explained:

> Without land how could we be called *arso adre* (person who lives from tilling the land)? It's true that we complained…… it never fed us well. But what else do we have here [rural areas]? What are we called then? Here, those

people without their own land even identify themselves as *arso adre (*19 Aug. 2012, Enjit *kebele).*

Implicit in the above account is that alternative livelihood opportunities are hardly available, and agriculture thus remains the most vital provider of a livelihood. During the year preceding the survey, almost all of the sample households, in both study areas, were relying on crop farming for their livelihood. The result revealed that 75% in Tach Gayint and 92% in Fogera were also involved in livestock rearing, implying that most households practiced mixed farming (crop farming and livestock rearing). In addition, 61% of the households in each of the study areas were engaged in poultry while bee-keeping (Tach Gayint, 12%; Fogera, 8%) and livestock fattening (Tach Gayint, 5%; Fogera, 13%) were also practiced (see Table 4.10).

Table 4.10
Composition of household livelihood activities (percent)

Major livelihood activities	Household participation (%)	
	Tach Gayint (N=300)	Fogera (N=200)
Crop production	98.7	100.0
Livestock rearing	75.3	91.5
Poultry	60.7	60.8
Public works (e.g., Food-for-work)	81.3	7.0
Bee-keeping	12.3	8.0
Livestock fattening	5.3	12.6
Local agricultural wage work	11.7	1.0
Local non-agricultural wage work	32.0	0.5
Migration for agricultural labour	45.3	2.0
Migration for non-agricultural labour	25.0	1.0
Eucalyptus sales (e.g., poles for building, etc)	10.3	24.1
Trade (grain and pulses)	9.7	1.5

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

More interestingly, 81% of sampled households in Tach Gayint had participated in public works (e.g., food-for-work) in order to earn food and income as part of their livelihood activities. This is so because of the

fact that the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) provides five days' employment opportunities per month for the period of six months to a significant number of households in the *woreda*.

Furthermore, 12% and 32% of the households in Tach Gayint *woreda* reported that their livelihood activity included local agricultural wage labour and non-agricultural wage labour, respectively. Migration for both agricultural and non-agricultural wage labour was also important as household livelihood activity for households in Tach Gaynt but only 2% and 1% of the households in Fogera involved in migration for agricultural and non-agricultural wage labour, respectively (Table 4.10). This shows the importance of labour migration for the livelihood of households in Tach Gayint. It is to this that we turn now.

4.4.1 Seasonal migration: The livelihood of the rural youth?

Seasonal labour migration has been one of the main features of the livelihoods of rural households particularly in those food insecure areas that are confronted with not only shortage of land but also problems of access to other sources of subsistence. It is particularly important in the case of Tach Gayint *woreda* where seasonal labour migration to various places forms an important additional source of income. Compared to those in Fogera, individuals and households in Tach Gayint are often unable to meet their subsistence needs through agriculture or off-farm employment in their villages. The purpose of this section is to examine the link between land and seasonal labour migration. The intention is not only to look at the relationship between access to land and seasonal migration but also to illustrate the dynamics as well as the conditions that shape the decisions of individuals and households in engaging in migration and the power relations at play.

Out of a total of 300 sampled households in Tach Gayint, 186 or 62% of the households had at least one member who migrated for employment in the past 12 months preceding the survey (Table 4.11). But, unlike Tach Gayint, very few households, only 5 (2.5%) in Fogera reported participation in labour migration. This suggests that seasonal labour migration is much more common amongst those households in Tach Gayint than in Fogera. As discussed in previous sections, landholdings are so small that households barely produce sufficient to feed their members, which was made worse by the prevailing land degradation (Chapter 6). As households cultivate smaller plots of land with poor soil fertility, many of them tend

to engage in migrating elsewhere in search of some seasonal opportunities. Most of the sampled households in both areas (80.7% in Tach Gayint and 94% in Fogera) perceived that access to land actually affects migration decisions (Table 4.11). As to the trends in the level of seasonal out-migration, the majority of the households in Tach Gayint (88.7%) indicated an increasing trend over the last decade. Contrastingly, 79% of the households in Fogera reported a decrease in the level of migration from their area (Table 4.11), probably because of the introduction of cash crops.

Table 4.11
Seasonal labour migration in the study areas

Labour Migration	Study Area			
	Tach Gayint		Fogera	
Households with member (s) migrating for employment in the last 12 months	186	(62.0)	5	(2.5)
Household member migrating for employment				
Household head	53	(28.5)	5	(100.0)
Son/daughter	141	(75.8)	-	-
Household perceives ability to migrate away from farms for long period of time	88	(30.0)	8	(4.0)
Household perceives land access affects migration decisions	242	(80.7)	188	(94.0)
Trends in the level of seasonal out migration in the last ten years				
Increased	266	(88.7)	16	(8.0)
Decreased	14	(4.7)	158	(79.0)
Fluctuating	12	(4.0)	24	(12.0)
No change	8	(2.7)	2	(1.0)

Note: Figures given in parentheses are percent.
Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

Most people in the study villages of Tach Gayint, particularly landless young men and those cultivating small plots of land as well as those who do not have access to other key resources such as oxen are the ones generally migrating more. Amongst this group are people that have encountered increasing difficulty of feeding their family, while cultivating on a very small piece of farmland that they received from their parents. The available option for such people is to go far away from home areas and

own family with the hope of coming back collecting some fortune. The migrant leaves the village telling his family to stay home while taking care of the small farm land until he comes back collecting some money through which the family will purchase some crops to cover the deficit in the household's food balance. Some migrants also tend to stay in the destination areas in cases where access to land is gained through different ways. For example, many seasonal migrants who went to the Metekel area of Benishangul-Gumuz region stayed longer in the area after the completion of their short seasonal contracts with the commercial farms operating in the area. Some migrants encroached into the forest to acquire a plot of land so that after cultivating for a year or so they in due time brought their families and tried to establish new settlements in this way (see Chapter 7 and 8).

The youngsters who did not get farm land during the land redistribution program which the government carried out in 1991/92 are also part of the people who have been migrating. By now, these people have already established their own households with many children. The trend towards engaging in labour migration is also significant among the youth who completed secondary school education and some graduates from colleges who could not find any job. In the FGDs, it was stated that parents who covered the study expenses of the youth, were burdened by these. After completing their education, however, finding no jobs makes them to migrate, as they do not want to be dependent on their families again. While the majority of the parents themselves are either illiterate or have minimum literacy (just read and write) acquired through informal adult education and religious teachings, they are convinced that their children must go to school. They consider that education is the main avenue to secure well-paid permanent and skilled employment opportunities both in public service and private sector. Most parents who had participated in the FGDs commonly perceived that the hope from sending their children to schools and colleges is primarily that they will get employment in government offices. The hope is not just for their children but also it is with the aspiration that children will look after their parents once they get salaried jobs. Undoubtedly, more educational facilities, both primary and secondary level, are now accessible and in addition, technical and vocational colleges are also available in some *woredas* and zonal towns to meet this societal demand for education. Even at national level, the number of higher education institutions (universities) has quadrupled just in the span of a decade.

This implies that more people graduate from colleges and universities every year. It appears, however, that although educational opportunities have expanded at all levels, there are now growing number of young college graduates residing both in rural and urban areas who cannot find jobs. This is one of the serious predicaments in which the country in general finds itself in today (e.g., Mains 2011). Particularly, in Tach Gayint it has been more challenging for those young graduates who cannot find a job to stay with their parents as the households themselves in the area struggle with recurring food shortages and persistent poverty in general. One elderly farmer from Agatt *kebele* in Tach Gayint gives a picture of the situation:

> Today, the farmer struggles to send his children to school. He 'sells' his land to purchase food for his children and pay their school fees and cover other family expenses. However, if the children are lucky enough to finish their education, they come back home just to be dependent on their parents even after graduation as they have limited chance to get employed. If a vacancy for a job somewhere is announced, these unemployed graduated children of the poor farmer do not have any money for transportation to go to that place. Here again, parents sell a piece from the remaining land to send their children to search for employment, who most probably get no job thus come back again to depend on them. In general, our aspiration for the employment of our children through education is becoming unpromising these days. Yet, illiteracy is a bad thing that we do not want to inherit to our children (20 Dec. 2012, Agatt *kebele*).

While the fieldwork was underway, I was able to talk to a number of young graduates who were complaining about the limited job opportunities available, and one officer in Tach Gayint *woreda* civil service office estimated the number of young graduates seeking jobs at more than 300. This situation adds up to those individuals and households already facing constraints from the shortage of land and outright landlessness in the area. One old priest explained as follows:

> As a result, many youth of the *kebele* were left with no choice but to go far away to other places leaving their families, parents and home area behind, searching just for survival. There is not any youth left here today even to help raise a fallen ox while working in a farm. They are found scattered in other places. The rest of the people remaining here are only older people and children. The reason behind all this is that people do not have farmland

> on which they can sustain the life of their families or could not find employment here. Fathers and mothers try to keep these migrating youth at home by giving them a small piece of land carving from their own thus risking their own livelihoods. However, the land is anyway not enough (23 Sept. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

Who makes the decision about migration?

Although it has been argued, both theoretically and empirically, that migration is mainly a decision that is made at the household level whereby members of the household decide collectively (Stark 1991, Taylor and Martin 2001), also individual members of the household appear to have made decisions to engage in seasonal migration. Within the household, individuals' especially male youth decide by themselves to go to other places and look for a job. Focus group participants from Enjit *kebele* in Tach Gayint explained as follows:

> The parents do not make any decisions. The youth make decisions by themselves and even go away without the knowledge of their parents or any other person. It is usually after they left their village that they try to inform their parents that they have already gone by calling someone they know who has a mobile cellphone (commonly government employees working in their *kebele* or *woreda* towns). On the other hand, in situations where parents find out about these intentions before their children leave, they tend to do everything it takes to make them change their mind. Even if they cannot promise them to provide more land, food, and clothes (as they cannot), they beg them to stay with them home. However, the youth usually insist and go away letting their parents and families stay here. These youth tell their parents that there is no use staying here anymore 'if we do not get any job, if there is no land to cultivate and sustain on, no food to eat, no clothes to wear," they ask, "what are we supposed to do here?" (FGD, 14 Oct. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

This has been commonly the trend among the young people who have not yet established own households. Many viewed it as an opportunity to stand on their own since the income they earn from this is considered to be their own. In some cases, seasonal migration appeared to have weakened the authority of heads of households over younger male household members as their growing participation in migration tend to challenge heads' control over their labour power. It was asserted that in some cases

there were changes in position and status within the household when migrating sons started contributing to the financial needs of the household. However, during the individual interviews and group discussions, it came out that there were circumstances in which parents influenced their children psychologically to make such decisions. While observing a young migrant in the family of their neighbor bringing some fortune, they said to their children, "other parents' children work, going to other places and bring money and change the lives of their family while mine stay home" (14 Oct. 2012, Enjit *kebele*). Some of the youth were influenced as a result of this and go away without telling anybody.

Nevertheless, there have been also many migration decisions that involved discussions among household members to act collectively as regards to whether to go, who should go, when and where to go. This was the case within households where heads of households themselves participated in seasonal migration. In those cases, the maneuvering roles in making decisions are mostly exercised by heads of households. When the household heads are the ones migrating, there are concerns over how those household members left behind will manage to keep things going as usual. As a result discussions take place among household members as a strategy of minimizing risks that will probably occur at the household level due to the gaps created from the temporary absence of heads. As argued in this chapter, the size of landholdings and its productivity is a determinant of seasonal migration, and for those household heads who go seasonally away from their home, migration is usually a necessary complement to what they can earn on their smallholdings. Accordingly, there are normally two options for those households who have some land but who also consider to send one or more of its members away. The first one is that some members will stay home in order to look after the land and the family. The following case (of a household head interviewed in Enjit *kebele*) shows how migration decisions take place within the households:

> Last season, I decided to go for few months hoping to come back with something to my family but my eldest son insisted that he should go instead. Since it was not my first time experience, I convinced him to stay home. I told my son to stay home and take care of his mother and the rest of the family and to wait for me while cultivating and taking care of the farmland with all possible efforts. This was the way how I organized my family to make sure that the land is not left uncultivated although we don't get much from it (7 Oct. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

In other words, other family members who stay back in the village will take care of the land. They cultivate and do all the farm work on it in the absence of the household head. In such a way the household sends one or more of its members away rather than the entire household as a strategy to supplementing the income derived from the land.

Whether or not migration involved collective decisions, the loss of one or more worker due to seasonal migration seems to affect some households that lacked other able-bodied member (s) especially when only the elderly or a wife with small children remain at home to look after land and other activities. For example, a farmer in his early 50s from Agatt *kebele* explained his own experiences as follows:

> Besides …last year one of my boys went away. I faced a lot of difficulty to cover the gaps created especially in the farm work due to his absence. I worked hard and tried to do the job all by myself. In all activities of the farm work like weeding, mowing, threshing and collecting the harvest, I was loaded with a burden of job that resulted due to his absence. I tried to close the gap a bit by hiring and making another person to help me do some of the work. I divided the land ……, and gave part of the land out under sharecropping arrangement with another person. By now, thank God the boy has returned. When I compare the situation I was in last year and the situation I am this year, I can easily understand the great gaps created at home when a person goes away (30 Dec. 2012, Agatt *kebele*).

Despite the above account of a household that struggled on its own and at times, hired local labour to fill gaps created due to the absence of working household member, the community also extends support to those households who suffered seriously as a result of the absence of family labour. In a focus group discussion held in Enjit *kebele*, the participants indicated that the community has a long tradition of helping and supporting each other in times of difficulty through informal social associations (*Mahiber*):

> We have a *Mahiber* called Misrak. Through this, we try to help each other. Last season, three of our *Mahiber* members migrated in search of employment away from home leaving their families behind. Their families suffered a lot as they did not have anything to sustain on. What did we do at this time? We contributed five birr each and distributed the money among the wives of those members who left. As the wife is left here all alone, there is no one who supports her with taking care of the children and the farm land. There is no one who weeds the farm for her. There is a saying that "a pebble

> supports a big pot (*gan*) to stand still". Similarly, we gave the wives the money so that it could be of some service to them and in welcoming their husbands when they come back home. Sometimes, we also help them in such activities like weeding, mowing, threshing and collecting their harvest (14 Oct. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

The findings generally seem to corroborate Bezu and Holden's (2014: 259) observation among the rural youth in southern Ethiopia that "lack of land access is forcing the youth away from an agricultural livelihood" and to migrate in search of other livelihoods (see also Tadele and Gella 2012; Berckmoes and White 2014 for similar findings in Burundi).

Type of work and common destinations

The main destination areas for migrants include Metemma, Quara, Humera, Metekel, Wollega and Dubti. Some of the destinations, for example, Humera has been one of the most important ones for agricultural labourers, flocking from the Amhara and Tigrai regions associated with the expansion of commercial farms since the second half of the 1960s (Rahmato 2009). The opening up of seasonal employment opportunities in these areas of northwestern lowlands gave rise to migration of people from various *woredas* of the Amhara regional state. The migrants mainly engage in unskilled agricultural wage labour including weeding, mowing, and threshing activities of sesame, cotton and sorghum (*Mashila*) crops. They continuously migrate in June and July starting from April, returning in September. Again they leave in November for mowing tasks, returning back to their villages between January and February. These patterns of seasonal migration generally coincide with periods of high demands for labour in their home villages as the peak periods of planting and harvesting do not actually differ with the periods in these major migration destinations. Despite this, thousands of people leave their villages seeking farm employment opportunities during these periods, even when they own land themselves, as was the case for the overwhelming majority of sampled households in our survey. During the period of my fieldwork, over 200,000 workers were required during harvesting season in northwestern lowlands of Metemma and Humera. This was the number of people required by employers during that period as announced through Fana FM radio.

Rural areas form the major destinations for seasonal labour migration, in which three-fourth of migrants are engaged in rural-rural migration.

Some people have also migrated to towns to obtain temporary employment as casual daily labourers and porters in the informal sector as well as in formal construction sector. The survey (see Table 4.12) reveals that labour migrants have to travel to more distant areas in search of employment opportunities, with respectively 75.5% of household heads and 67% of other household members (son/daughter) who had migrated reported to have traveled away from the South Gondar Administrative Zone. Some others, 19% and 26% of heads and son/daughter migrated out of the Amhara region. This pattern of labour migration involving travels out of Amhara region partly challenges the recent emphasis on the constraining nature of the ethnic based regionalization of the country in which it has been assumed to pose administrative barriers to interregional labour movements (Devereux et al. 2003, Gebreselassie 2006).

Table 4.12
Seasonal labour migration destinations

Labour Migration Destinations	Rural				Urban			
	Within zone	Out of zone	Out of region	Total	With in zone	Within region	Out of region	Total
Tach Gayint (%)								
Household head	1.9	64.2	9.4	75.5	3.8	11.3	9.4	24.5
Son/daughter	5.0	56.7	8.5	70.2	1.4	10.6	17.7	29.7
Fogera (%)								
Household head	20.0	60.0	-	80.0	-	20.0	-	20.0
Son/daughter	-	-	-		-			

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

The rural areas located in the northwestern lowlands came to form major destinations, as a result of increasing expansion of commercial farms, providing opportunities for the large number of seasonal migrant labourers. Wages are substantially higher in these areas as compared to normal rates paid in their localities, as well as in towns. Turning briefly to the effects of seasonal migration, it plays a key role in contributing to overcome household food shortages and in few cases, it provides opportunities for saving and investing in assets. But this depends also on luck, as one informant explains:

> It's all about luck, it is more like a lottery. People migrate knowing that they have two chances about getting a fortune. Either they will get some (whatever is the amount) or they will not. Bearing this in mind, they leave. If God follows and be with them, they come back with some income. The earnings are primarily used to purchase grains for their family. If anything extra remains, it is usually used to buy *Gilgel* (small animals such as goats and sheep) with it hoping that the *Gilgel* will multiply which will be sold later to buy an ox (*Kenjaa*). Otherwise, the income earned does not usually go beyond clothing and food consumption (22 Oct. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

In group discussions in all study *kebeles*, it was also expressed, the income of migrants has been often used to cover the subsistence needs of households. Nonetheless, there were some people who were lucky to "win the lottery" and were able to buy some animals, and some others also constructed houses with roofs covered by corrugated iron sheets (*Korkoro bet*). Participants assert that it is the concerted effort of the migrant member and those staying back that enable households to use their income from seasonal migration to invest in some assets. One experienced migrant household head explained that while he goes away from home, his wife does not simply wait for him to come back with something; instead she struggles to create some fortune on her side too. This includes cultivating their land as well as preparing and selling local drinks so as to generate some income. So that the money she is generating is used for household subsistence and they used the money, which he brought in several rounds to construct the house they are living in now and also managed to buy a *kenjaa* as well. It was also the case that some migrate in order to generate some saving that will be invested in education. For example, two young men interviewed in Enjit *kebele* who just returned from Metemma indicated that they have been admitted to college education in Debre Tabor. They went to the lowlands and came back with some income that they will use to cover their expenses during their studies in Debre Tabor. They do not intend to stop with this. After covering their expenses with their earlier incomes for this upcoming academic year (dry season / *begga*), they plan to go back again to the lowlands using their vacation (*Kiremt*) time to work and collect some income that will be used for the next academic year. Some other young men tend to spend their savings from seasonal migration on consumer goods for themselves, most commonly mobile phones (Box 4.2).

Box 4.2

Asemamaw is 20 years old. He lives with his parents. His parents own two *timads* of land, which he considers is too small. After taking his secondary school leaving examination, he left to Quara without telling his parents:

> There is rural road project in our *woreda* which will connect Tach Gayint and Mekdela. I worked in this project as a daily labourer for two weeks. After a discussion with a colleague, we left to Quara in search of better employment in terms of the wage rate. I used my earlier earnings from the road project to cover my transportation costs. Within a month, I was able to save 1500 birr as the wage rate is much higher than the amount we can earn at home. Although it varies for different types of tasks, I was paid on the average 60 birr a day. Is it not a lot compared to the amount we get here… 25 birr? ……I bought a mobile phone, eyeglasses, shoes and clothes for myself with the money. As a result, I look different from other people in my locality even though I didn't save the money. I am dressed better. I came back here hoping that I would pass the secondary school leaving examination but unfortunately, I didn't succeed. I am now thinking to go to Metemma and stay there as long as I find a job (19 Jan. 2013, Agatt).

While some households tried to put together their earnings from seasonal migration for constructing houses and other productive assets including animals as well as investment in education, there were also others who use it for repaying their debts. One official from the *woreda* administration office particularly stressed that indebtedness is a serious problem in Tach Gayint in which he argued that not paying debts taken from government institutions has become a culture in the area. Many people take credit from the Amhara Credit and Saving Institution (ACSI) operating in the area as well as from food security related projects such as Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP). Yet few people so far had repaid their debts. He asserted that it looks like as if the money was distributed just as free aid. Because of this problem, the institution has now ceased giving credits and only engaged in trying to get back the money from individuals. Fertilizers are also taken on credit but these debts are accumulating too. In most cases the credit was spent on consumer goods (such as food and

constructing houses) rather than invested in productive assets and this has been the issue that has complicated the debt repayment. In discussions, participants indicated that indeed the issue of debts put the community in a more vulnerable situation with government bodies. Now this situation has been used by local government authorities to threaten individuals and households that their landholdings will be confiscated if they do not pay their debts. For that reason, many migrate to collect some cash so that they can pay their debts. What happens is that the Development Agents get informed that this farmer or his/her son has come back from the place that he went to make an income. Then these local authorities remind this farmer to repay his/her debt before spending the income collected. Accordingly, the farmer pays the income to get rid of the debt. Even if they are not reminded, people tend to pay using their income from migration as the threats from local authorities are mounting. One informant in Agatt *kebele* indicated that the threats will continue affecting other household members even when you are away for certain period:

> If a farmer has taken any credit, his children and wife might be forced or asked to sell their livestock, if there are any, to pay the credit even in his absence. They will also be threatened that their land will be confiscated. They will be alarmed that saving and credit center will take over their land (22 Dec. 2012, Agatt *kebele*).

Discussions so far focused on the general conditions and patterns of seasonal migration with reference to the areas of origin of migrants, but it is important not to present a picture that seasonal migration is without challenges. What appears commonly a shared view among people in all study villages in Tach Gayint is the widespread worry regarding the well-being of migrants in the destination areas. As seasonal migration involves moving away from the familiar surroundings of one's own locality to other places, there have been challenges that migrants often face, including health shocks, cultural and ethnic differences, competition and conflicts between social groups and individuals. Health risk was a commonly mentioned challenge. Since the overwhelming majority of the migrants travel to the northwestern lowland areas, malaria is one of the major threats. While the fieldwork was under way in Enjit *kebele*, people of the village mourned for two migrant youths who recently died because of malaria.

Box 4.3

Tarekegn is a 25-years-old married man. He has two daughters. His household has two *timads* of land i.e., one *timad* is registered under his name and the other one *timad* in his wife's name. In order to provide for his household he had migrated to Humera for few months while his wife stayed behind looking for the family and land:

> I went to Humera in July in search of agricultural wage employment since we could not produce enough food for our consumption for a year from the land we have. Here we get two sacks of harvest to the maximum from a *timad* of land if we are lucky. Therefore, it was a necessity for me to look for some income to sustain and feed my family. I was employed for two months for weeding activities in one of the sesame farms there. From the wages paid, I was able to save 1200 birr during my short stay. Before traveling to Humera, I did the cultivation (field preparation and ploughing) and planting of the two *timads* of land that we have here. And my wife did the weeding activities with the help of my relatives. I came back in September and did the rest of the activities such as mowing and harvesting of the produce. The wage rate there in Humera is much higher than here in our area. A daily wage of 20 -25 Birr is paid here in our area whereas in Humera a rate of 60 -80 birr is paid for a day labour and even for mowing tasks the wage rate increases as high as 100 birr. But there are lots of challenges there too. For example, I was ill for some time because of malaria and typhoid. Since then I went to health centers two times for treatment as the malaria did not go away. As you can see me now I am not feeling ok. It has been now three months since I came back from Humera. I am worried that this malaria thing will not leave me soon (18 Jan. 2012, Agatt *kebele*).

One informant explained the case of one of the deceased:

It was yellow fever (*Bicha woba*) that took his life. The father is old and weak. His elder son went to the lowland looking for a job. Malaria caught him there. It was said that he was taken to the nearby hospital for a medical

> treatment. His parents here heard the news and were called. By the time the younger brother arrived there at the hospital, he was already dead. The younger brother came back with empty hands burying his dead elder brother there. This is the reason why we were giving condolences to the dead youth's parents and the families. What made the situation worse is that the younger brother who went to bring his elder brother came back sick of malaria and is found confined in bed (7 Oct. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

The account of one household head from Agatt *kebele* highlights even more important aspects of seasonal migration (see Box 4.3). In contrast to lowland destination areas, malaria is not a problem in almost all of the study villages of Tach Gayint. During the fieldwork, nonetheless I met several people who just returned from the places where they were working for the past few months and some of them were not well "because of malaria". One farmer in his mid-40s explains:

> Many youngsters' came back sick and became a burden to their parents as they spend money for the treatment of the disease. Some of these migrants who come back sick especially with malaria need green paper ……as its cure, though temporary. Therefore, they are forced to spend the income they collected to purchase green paper and other modern drugs to get remedy from the malaria they came back with from the places they went to. Here in our place, there is no such a thing called malaria. Even recently, a boy of my neighbor has come back seriously sick. He is in bed now. There is no chance that he will make it. He is as weak as a dead man himself (25 Dec. 2012, Agatt *kebele*).

Another challenge that the seasonal migrants complained about is the harsh daily labor and the long working hours with no shelters. From what came out from group discussions, there has been a certain kind of group contractual arrangement beside the one in which individual migrants work as daily wage earners. For example, a group of daily laborers with seven or eight members takes a contract to weed, mow or thresh wide area of crop fields. Accordingly, the group stays the whole day there in the farmland working. They also spend the nights on the farm land. They do not get or have any shelter where they can spend at least the nights. Their employer does not provide them one and this exposes them to harsh weather conditions. Therefore, through time, they were caught by disease, usually malaria or other illnesses. In addition, migrant workers indicated changes in the type of food consumed in the lowland areas as a challenge. A young migrant, aged 22, describes the situation as follows:

> Here, especially in the good times, the food is *injera* (made from teff) or otherwise, we eat wheat. However, there in the lowlands, the food is what they call *wodah kir* (*Gunfo*) or a kind of forage made from sorghum. We are not used to it and face difficulty adapting to this common food in the lowlands. As a result, we suffer from hunger and easily get sick. In addition, the water we drink is not good as well. We get it from open barrels filled and left in an open air. It is this water that has been exposed to the sun the whole day in that hot climate that we drink. It is not difficult to imagine how bad it could taste and affect our health (12 Jan. 2013, Enjit *kebele*).

What appears perhaps also serious is the competition and conflict between different groups of migrants in the destination areas. Thousands of agricultural wage labourers migrate to these destinations from various areas. They migrate from Gondar, Gojjam and Semien Shewa to the lowlands seasonally. When they arrive there, they team up into different groups: those who came from Gondar to one group, those from Gojjam to one group and those from Semien Shewa to another group, based on region of origin and/or ethnicity. When they all meet at the destination areas of the lowlands, it often happens that a group of migrants coming from the same area usually picks a fight with another group of migrants, who came from a different area, using small axes, machetes, and knives. Accordingly, if a person is attacked from one group, the other group in its turn marches to attack the group that attacked a member of their group. They attack each other just because they came from different places of origin competing for the available employment opportunities. This group conflict is one of the security challenges the migrants encounter in the places they go to. A number of labourers interviewed reported several cases of such group fighting that led to many deaths. As a result of growing threats from this kind of conflict, those from the same village or neighbouring areas travel and work together during their stay in the lowlands. If someone from a group is encountered by another group while walking alone for different reasons, it is more likely that the person will be robbed of his money. Surprisingly, almost all of the seasonal migrants in the area are from the various parts of the Amhara region belonging to the same Amhara ethnic group.

The grouping also takes another form or dimension. This is the grouping formed, on the one hand, among those migrants who had travelled and worked in the area in the past. These early migrants have made the destinations their home. As they started migrating to the area relatively

long ago, they are more familiar and have habituated themselves to the climate and the lifestyle of the lowlands. These earlier migrant workers were identified by the local name *Sallug*. This group includes not only the experienced seasonal migrants but also those people who moved and settled there, especially in Metemma, through resettlement programs of the regional government. On the other hand, thousands of new first time migrants also go to these same areas every season looking for a job and these people were called *Gofer*. The massive entrance of the *Gofer* to the lowlands causes a lot of anxiety to those early migrants who have made their living there. The worry of the *Sallug* is that all employment opportunities might be taken away by the newcomers. There was also apprehension that the wages earned might become lower as a result of large number of young men flocking every time to the areas. As a result, these early migrants get organized in small groups in attacking and abusing the newcomer *Gofers*.

Generally, although seasonal migration for agricultural wage work is a necessary livelihood strategy for many individuals and households in South Gondar Administrative Zone, particularly in Tach Gayint, there are several challenges and risks faced by seasonal migrant workers in major destination areas. Nonetheless, despite the challenges and risks they face while away, most rural youth appear to leave their villages, at least seasonally, not because they wish to do so, but more because there are very limited opportunities if they stay in their villages.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how rural people actually access land in the study areas under the prevailing context of land shortages. In the study areas, although households predominantly depend on farming for their livelihoods, access to land has become more constrained to earn a decent livelihood from it. The current pattern of land holdings is predominantly comprised of small plots characterized by low or even declining productivity although there was a difference between the two *woredas* studied. As illustrated in this chapter, young rural people appear to have been facing increasing difficulty in gaining access to land, and those younger households who have been able to access some land tend to have much smaller holdings than households headed by relatively older people, reflecting the intergenerational inequality of landholdings.

Most households in study areas gained access to land through administrative-based land redistribution and inheritance. Particularly, inheritance and gifts appear to be key sources of land access by which parents have been able to carve a portion of their land to children although this meant continued subdivisions and fragmentation of the already-small plots. Currently, there is widespread awareness of the unsustainability of these practices of access to land, because plots are now generally small and there is very limited opportunity for further redistribution of land. While parents generally carve a portion of land to their children, the size of land that they would actually give is normally very small. Given this practice, parents seem to have encountered increasing difficulty in meeting the demands of their children as most of them tend to have many children, in which sooner or later each will claim a bit from it. Some of the youth who have already received very small plots from their parents, are finding it difficult to make a living. Under this situation, tensions often occur within a household when the demands of each household member could not be effectively met from the apparently small landholding patterns. This appears a situation in which children wishing parents to die sooner than later so that they can inherit their land. The tensions and conflicts that arise are not confined only within the household but also tend to extend to deepening intergenerational tensions in the communities.

As this chapter has illustrated, the growing demand for land, by both men and women, in contexts of decreasing land availability has certainly brought changes to the longstanding patriarchal institutions of land inheritance and allocation in the study area that usually allowed women's access to land through marriage. For instance, as women's access to land has been increasingly becoming a requirement for marriage or for greater independence, this has brought significant changes in land inheritance relations around land.

Under the context of the apparently decreasing availability of land, and limited options for local employment opportunities, particularly in Tach Gayint, the rural youth and households who were finding it difficult to make a living from their 'vanishingly small plots' of land appear to migrate seasonally seeking employment opportunities elsewhere. This trend of seasonal out migration has been increasing over the last decade.

Generally, this chapter has illustrated the means through which land is accessed under the prevailing context of land shortages – where the available landholdings are both intensively cultivated and often insufficient for

household livelihood requirements – in order to comprehend the dynamics of access to land in contemporary rural Ethiopia, particularly the predicaments of the rural youth that reflect the increasingly difficult situation in which the rural youth and younger households are being trapped when alternative income opportunities are not locally available. By doing so, it enabled a better understanding of how the contemporary politics of land access is shaping, and is shaped by social forces and political economic structures and processes as well as local ecological dynamics.

Notes

[1] US$1 was roughly equivalent to 18 birr in December 2012.

[2] This actually has become to a certain extent counterproductive. During the fieldwork, I found out several land "cases" between family members especially between a father and son and between a mother and her son. Sons normally after cultivating for a year or so through sharecropping arrangements made with their parents they tended towards claiming their rights over the land and this resulted in conflicts. Under such circumstances, children argue that it is their legitimate right to claim their share of land from their parents as the allocation of land to households was undertaken based on the consideration of the number of household members.

5 Understanding the dynamics of local conflict over land in south Gondar zone

5.1 Introduction

Land is an important political resource that has always been a critical factor that establishes or challenges power relations between and among individuals, households, communities and the state (Borras and Franco 2010b, Rahmato 2009, Lund and Boone 2013). Issues regarding land have always remained highly contentious political agendas in Ethiopia in which land tenure policies always implicated a highly political tone. This is the case as the country is "a multi-ethnic and multi-nation state where nationality and culture are intimately tied to place" and thus issues of access to land and tenure security have been "a Gordian knot of rivaling political and economic interests" (wa Githinji and Mersha 2007: 310). However, the heated debates have so far been mainly hinged on state versus private land tenure policy options often captivated by the broader sense of exploring their economic viability for agrarian transformation and thus, looked hardly into the evolving complexity and local dynamics of access to land and conflicts over it.

This chapter provides an analysis of land tenure security and the dynamics of land-related conflicts in the context of the current land title registration and certification program being implemented in the study areas. Given the pervasive dependence among rural households on increasingly scarce land resources for their livelihoods, access to it has been increasingly becoming a source of competition and conflict. It is the contention of this chapter that land conflicts have been greater in Fogera *woreda* than in Tach Gayint partly because of the expansion of rice as the most important crop in the area, the relative availability of land, its proximity to markets and its relatively greater agronomic potential which together have

been intensifying competition that are taking place over access to it. Given the relatively higher household landholding size as compared to those households in Tach Gayint *woreda*, the widespread land contestations and conflicts in Fogera are less over scarcity *per se* but must be contextualized within the increased values of land related to the introduction of rice and within the political economy of local governance and land administration processes. The chapter thus seeks to move beyond the popular assertion that land conflicts are the outcome of land scarcity although the latter is still perceived as a factor. It must rather be viewed in relation to political economic, social and ecological contexts which create it. In addition, unlike many cases elsewhere in the country as well as in sub-Saharan Africa, the role of ethnic identities cannot explain the conflicts that exist between farmers as the rural population of the study areas is ethnically homogenous. Nevertheless, the role of local kinship ties and the general level of involvement in local social and political relations bear emphasis for understanding the conflicts, especially the ways through which the conflicts are framed and solidified as the disputing parties often align themselves along these ties to mobilize support for their claims.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the pattern of land-related conflicts in the study areas. The study areas were initially selected to illustrate differences in land scarcity, agro-ecological potential and access to markets, and intensity of land related conflicts. Drawing from our household survey, archival research of court land dispute cases and qualitative studies, the rest of the chapter explores the perception of land tenure security and land rights' awareness which will be followed by detailed analysis of the nature of land disputes. As will be shown, the land conflicts have occurred at different levels, which include intra-household conflict (with a gender and generational dimension), between households, between villages, and between farmers and local authorities. It shows how such conflicts over land are shaping intra-family, marriage, gender and age relations. The chapter then focuses on the intricacies of issues of local governance and systems of land conflict resolution with a view to understanding their dynamics and linkages with the land conflicts. The goal is to gain an understanding of the dynamics of local politics and power relations, both in general terms and within the land administration system, and how these (re)shape the land disputes.

5.2 The pattern of land conflict

It has been argued that insecurity of land tenure in Ethiopia is generally considered to be higher than in other sub-Saharan African countries (Deininger and Jin 2006: 1246) and this issue has long been at the core of policy debates. The debates often turn on the relationship between land tenure security and agricultural investment and productivity and land related conflicts. As a result, to reduce the widespread tenure insecurity, land certification programs have been implemented since 2003, particularly in some regions of the country. It is often argued that land registration is essential for improving security of tenure, reduction of land related disputes, and improving access to credit from financial institutions (De Soto 2000, World Bank 2003, Marquardt 2006). What will be shown in this chapter is that land registration, in particular in combination with decentralizing power on land issues to local authorities, did not reduce conflicts over land. Actually there have been increased conflicts within households, between households, between households and local administrations, regarding the usufruct (as land remains owned by the state) of individual and communal holdings. By placing the land registration within the political economy of power relations in our study areas, a more realistic picture will arise, which shows the complexity of land tenure relations, and the naïveté to expect that land registration or land titling to less land conflicts, greater perceived stability in land relations and therefore creating options for land-based development, which is often assumed in the mainstream literature.

In the study areas, particularly in Fogera *woreda*, land disputes have actually become pervasive in recent years. Table 5.1 presents the incidence and nature of land disputes reported by sampled households. Despite the findings that seem to indicate high levels of tenure security, which we will discuss shortly, a significant share of sampled households had land related conflicts. In Tach Gayint, 25% of the households had experienced land disputes in the last 5 years before 2012, when the survey was done. The land disputes are particularly intense in Fogera, in which 60% of the sampled households indicated experiencing conflict over land (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1
Incidence of land conflicts

Incidence of Land Disputes	Study Area	
	Tach Gayint	Fogera
Household had land dispute over the last 5 years (%)	(25.3)	(60.1)
Dispute over (% of total)[a]		
Land rights and boundaries with other households	(89.2)	(89.9)
Inheritance	(6.8)	(11.8)
Land access, land use and appropriation of benefits (intra-household)	(24.3)	(14.3)
Land use and appropriation of benefits with local authorities	(4.1)	(19.3)
Dispute involved (% of total)[a]		
Other farmers	(90.5)	(89.9)
Local government (woreda and kebele authorities)	(4.1)	(19.3)
Zonal and regional authorities	-	-
Household/family members	(29.7)	(21.8)
Household had conflict over grazing rights on communal land	17 (5.7)	73 (36.5)

[a] Column totals exceed 100 because certain land disputes have multiple causes and involve multiple agents.

Note: Figures given in parentheses are percents.

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

As the survey results reveal, land conflicts are increasingly common in Fogera *woreda* resulting in growing tensions in social relationships at the household and community level. As already demonstrated in the preceding chapter, access to land has been becoming increasingly constrained in the study areas. A farmer in his forties describes the situation:

> Disputes over land have become daily phenomena. Today, even a piece of land as small as a line of land that the plough just fits once (*and digir meret*) has become the source of conflict in the community that sometimes go to the extent of killing (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 9 December 2012).

Nonetheless, informants contend that the land related conflicts are not new but then have become widespread, in terms of their incidence and severity, as access to land become very limited due to the increasing general scarcity of land. One informant explains this:

> Even historically, land has always been a cause for conflicts. Let alone today, when there is not enough land for farming, even in the old times, when there was abundant land for farming, the issue of land ownership has always been the cause of grave/severe conflicts between individuals and communities, and among various communities and ethnic groups. Land has been the cause of many blood shedding conflicts (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 13 October 2012).

This resonates to what Shipton (1994: 347) once noted in relation to Africa that "nothing excites deeper passions or gives rise to more bloodshed than do disagreements about territory, boundaries, or access to land resources". Although most of the households in both of the study *woredas* are aware of the general shortage of land and the intensifying competition over it, the underlying causes of the pervasive disputes over land appear to be more than just land shortages. As the survey findings demonstrated, there is a significant difference between the two study areas in terms of average landholding size. In Fogera, households have, on average, 1.0 hectare of land as compared to 0.74 hectares by those households in Tach Gayint. In addition, there seems to be also greater land size inequality in Fogera as compared to Tach Gayint. Given these variations, the finding that households in Fogera experienced significantly higher incidences of land disputes than those in Tach Gayint suggest that the disputes are not primarily over an absolute shortage or scarcity of land (but also about its value, and unequal access). In this chapter it is argued that the expansion in the cultivation of rice in Fogera, as the most important crop, generated intense competition for land. This change in land use has created increased demand, in which many people have been trying to acquire a plot of land through a variety of ways, leading to intensified land conflicts between different land claimants. Strikingly, the high incidence of land disputes (particularly in Fogera) has been occurring in the context where the overwhelming majority of the sampled households perceive security of land tenure though issues of tenure insecurity are still present (see Chapter 3 Section 3.2.2 for the definition of 'perceived' tenure security).

5.3 Perception of land tenure security and land rights' awareness

Table 5.2 below presents the responses to the specific questions asked to obtain households perceptions of tenure security and land rights awareness. Multiple interrelated questions were asked to investigate their perception of security of tenure. Surprisingly, most of the sampled households in each of the study *woreda* (Tach Gayint 91%, and Fogera 93%) feel secure about the "ownership" of the land they cultivate (Table 5.2). The responses to subsequent questions seem to illustrate this sense of tenure security. For instance, only 16% (Tach Gayint) and 8% (Fogera) fear that their landholdings will be redistributed in the future. About 14% in Tach Gayint and 7% (Fogera) of the sampled households indicated that they have been evicted from their land during the last 10 years. In addition, 79.5% and 94.5% of the sampled households in Tach Gayint and Fogera, respectively feel secure in renting out land. In terms of perceptions regarding the profitability of investment in land, 98% of the households interviewed in Tach Gayint and 85% in Fogera perceive that land-related investments are profitable and feel such benefits will accrue to their own household. In Tach Gayint, only 11% of the households interviewed expect land redistribution in the future in their areas as compared to 36% in Fogera. Given the high level of perceived tenure security, it is not surprising to find that most of the sampled households (Tach Gayint, 86%; Fogera, 98%) think that the current land tenure system of state ownership is good for them.

As regards to households perception of the type of land rights, an overwhelming share of the sample in Fogera indicated to have the right to inheritance (95.5%), to rent (97.5%), sharecrop (98.5%) and mortgage (92.5%) their land. Furthermore, 27.3% and 11% answered to have the right to sell[1] and exchange their land with other plots in their communities, respectively. Land rights awareness, however, seems to be relatively less among households in Tach Gayint although still about 92% and 88% perceive to have the right to inherit and sharecrop land, respectively. But, contrasting with figures in Fogera, 65% and 57% of the households perceive the right to rent out and mortgage land, respectively (Table 5.2).

Table 5.2
Household perception of land tenure security

Perceptions of land tenure security	Tach Gayint		Fogera	
Household feels secure about its land rights	266	(90.8)	185	(92.5)
Fears from future redistribution of own land to others	46	(15.7)	15	(7.5)
Has been evicted from own land in the last 10 years	42	(14.3)	13	(6.5)
Feels secure in renting out land	233	(79.5)	189	(94.5)
Perceives benefits from investments in land will accrue to own household	286	(97.6)	170	(85.0)
Expects land redistribution in the future	32	(10.7)	72	(36.0)
Perceives current land tenure system is good	258	(86.0)	196	(98.0)
Perception of land rights [a]				
Perceives right to inherit	270	(92.2)	189	(95.5)
Perceives right to sell	40	(13.7)	54	(27.3)
Perceives right to rent it out	190	(64.8)	193	(97.5)
Perceives right to mortgage	167	(57.0)	183	(92.4)
Perceives right to sharecrop it out	257	(87.7)	195	(98.5)
Perceives right to exchange it with other plot	4	(1.4)	22	(11.1)

[a] Column totals exceed 100 because certain land disputes have multiple causes and involve multiple agents.

Note: Figures given in parentheses are percents.

Source: Author's own survey, 2012

These findings on the perception of land tenure security obviously beg for a closer scrutiny given the fact that land related disputes are widespread in the survey areas, and that the qualitative evidence collected in the field indicates that the issue is much more complex than the survey results seem to suggest. The latter actually helped to understand the complexity of the issue, going beyond the quantitative data and "trying to decipher what they might mean" (Isaacman 1990: 18).

It is often argued that the problem of tenure insecurity is the source of most land related problems in the country in which donors and academics pushed the government to address this problem for the rural population (Solomon 2004). Accordingly, the government has been undertaking a program of rural land registration since 2003 through which every rightful holder of agricultural land would be registered and issued a certificate of use rights. The Amhara region is one of the major regions that have em-

barked in land registration so as to address the problem of tenure insecurity and to establish a framework for land administration at the local level. The land registration and certification program being undertaken in the region was envisioned to take place in two phases (Adenew and Abdi 2005, Solomon 2004). During the first phase of the land certification process, landholders are being given a "primary book" of holding. At this stage the location of one's land is determined through the use of unconventional methods in which adjacent plots of other holders are used as references. In the second phase, which will involve the use of cadastral maps, each landholder will be issued 'secondary' book of holding. For example, according to data obtained from respective study *woreda* land administration and use offices, all of the 24,911 registered landholders in Tach Gayint have already received a primary certificate of holding while in Fogera, 36,119 landholders received the primary certificates by mid-2012 out of a total of 41,636 registered landholders.

One of the major objectives that the land registration program envisaged to accomplish was the reduction of land related disputes within families and between neighbouring households, and with agents of the state. Asked about the understanding of land certificates in their community, one informant describes as follows:

> This land registration certificate (book) helps mainly to easily resolve conflicts that may arise due to misunderstandings related to farm boundaries. In other words, if individuals go to the court because of boundary disputes, the boundary will be easily identified with the help of this registration certificate. It also enables us to claim land replacement for a land confiscated as it serves as evidence (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 15 Oct. 2012).

Despite this understanding of the benefit of land certificates, some farmers also expressed their apprehension that the certificate cannot ease and defend other tenure insecurity factors, especially when the state needs the land for different reasons. Furthermore, the farmers recognize the circumstances and the dynamics that are leading to this situation. One of the major sources of apprehension is related to the land laws that contain provisions that describe conditions upon which land use rights depend. A farmer, aged 34, explains:

> The big challenge that is alarming our community is the newly introduced land proclamation. According to this proclamation, if a farmer does not take care of his farm, if he does not build a terrace and plant tree seedlings around

> his farm, his land will be confiscated and be given to somebody else. Currently, it is not yet implemented except being used for a mobilization purpose among the community of the *kebele*. We are being told that if we are unable to take a proper care and make a proper use of our farmlands, we will be forced to give it up (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 22 Sept. 2012).

Similar views were raised during a group discussion in Fogera:

> There are people from the government body called Land administration and use (*Yemeriet atekakem*)…. They tell us that our lands will be taken away if we do not take good care of it through carrying out various activities. These activities may be like planting tree seedlings in the areas bordering our farms and building/constructing terraces in order to help keep soils of the farmlands from erosion. We are also being told to use 'compost'. Therefore, those farmers who do not take care of their farms such as by using 'compost', those who allow their farm to be invaded by weeds, those who do not make an earlier or timely preparation on their farm for cultivation, those who do not plant/sow their farm on time, and those who do not take care of their farm and work hard to improve its productivity, it is said that their land will be confiscated and given to somebody else who makes a better use of the farm land (Shina *kebele*, 10 Dec. 2012).

These forceful interventions and the possible sanction when they are not followed by the farmers will certainly have contributed to perceived tenure insecurity, or at least causing some doubts about the degree of security. Indeed, usufruct rights to land for farmers in the Amhara region and elsewhere in Ethiopia are in fact partial and conditional, circumscribed with a number of obligations, which could create a perception of insecurity among landholders. Some of the major conditions and obligations of acquiring landholdings in Amhara region include that: a) the landholder has to or is willing to be engaged in farming as a main source of his/her livelihood; b) the landholder is a rural resident within the regional state, and any holder of rural land absent in the rural *kebele* of residence for five consecutive years, without renting out or delegating a person who will take care of his/her holdings, will lose his/her right to land; c) landholdings are farmed on a regular basis and should not be left fallow for three consecutive years; d) a landholder should undertake 'proper' management of his/her holding. Any landholder who fails to fulfill any of these conditions and obligations may be confronted with the forfeiting his/her rights to land.[2] The determination by local government authorities whether each of these obligations have been met or not allows room for possible abuses

and mischief, leading to take land from rural people in an unjustified manner. For example, the determination of whether land has been mismanaged or not may be susceptible to biases deliberately used to alienate or expropriate ones land for a variety of purposes. Therefore land rights are actually precarious when regulations leave grey areas for different views on the determination of 'proper management of land' or 'productive use of land'.

Another issue raised by farmers particularly in the *kebeles* that are close to *woreda* towns was the growing risk from town expansions, as these entail land expropriations for different purposes. For example, informants and FGD participants in Enjit *kebele* (Tach Gayint *woreda*) indicated the insecurity among farmers in the *kebele* caused by the expansion of Arb Gebeya town, as its expansion sooner or later will swallow the surrounding farmlands. Focus group participants explained their apprehensions as follows:

> It has been said that the *woreda* town will expand more and more. When we hear that this expansion will take over and swallow the remaining land of this area, we frequently worry thinking that we do not have anywhere else to go to,…anywhere else where we can sustain our life on. …Of course, we worry a lot that they will take our lands as the town expands. And when this happens, we know it for sure how difficult it will be to find land. Besides, if a replacement land is going to be given to us, we know where they will take us. They may order us, for example, to go down to the lowland *kebeles*. …. This certificate cannot protect us from such issues. If an order comes from the government that our land is going to be taken or is needed for the purpose of the town expansion or another, we doubt that this land certificate will enable us keep our lands or get proper compensation. Because it is about the government that we are talking here who has all the powers to do so (Enjit *kebele*, 22 Oct. 2012).

Similarly, some of the farmers on the Fogera plain along the highway to Gondar interviewed for this study expressed that they have been told that their land is needed by a private investor[3] and they will soon be made to leave for which a compensation will be paid to each of them by the government. Due to the high fertility of their land that is requested by a private investor, the landholders insisted that they would prefer their land to remain agricultural land than converted to other non-agricultural use. They challenged the decision of the local government to expropriate their

land questioning whether the concerned authorities had made such a decision only after exhausting all other possibilities of locating agriculturally less suitable lands.

Although the Federal and regional land laws guarantee the right to a fair and prior compensation for expropriation of land for purposes of public use or private investment, concerns appear to exist particularly with regards to appropriation of land by local public authorities since such an exercise may likely be subject to easy manipulation by anyone with specific local power or vested interests. Under such circumstances, several important questions need to be raised that include "Who determines what is in the public interest? By what process? According to what rules? Have all alternatives been exhausted, and according to whose judgment? Who benefits and how from an eviction? Who receives compensation; how is this compensation calculated; is it fair and just; according to whom? Who monitors the process? What scope is there for appeals and grievances?" (Palmer et al. 2009: 37). Some of these concerns have already been addressed in the compensation laws of both Federal government (FDRE 2005, 2007) and regional government (ANRS 2007, 2011), that state the conditions under which rural landholdings would be expropriated and compensations may be paid. Compensation should be paid in advance, the amount of compensation should be determined on the basis of the replacement cost of the property on the expropriated land, displacement compensation should be equivalent to ten times the average annual income secured during the five years preceding the expropriation of the land, the valuation of property on rural land to be expropriated should be carried out by a committee of experts designated by the *woreda* administration and complaints and appeals regarding compensation may be submitted to *woreda* courts. Even so, as Rahmato argues the protection of land rights in fact "go beyond the legal construct and extend into the political sphere and the sphere of governance" (Rahmato 2009: 224).

Another important issue that continues threatening the security of tenure, and which the land certificate could not guarantee, is the challenge of increasing land scarcity. An older man explained:

> Thinking about land, especially in our *kebele*, I always feel insecure. The reason why I am worried emanates from what I observe. I am only an individual. If you take my four boys, they all are not given any farmland thus do not own any. Even families who have more children than I do have are not given any land. Hence, these youngsters spend their time hanging around

> the village. How long are they going to hang around? As part of my worry, I fear that what if the government comes up with a new proclamation that forces to redistribute even the existing small landholdings that we own considering these crying youths and other landless people of this *kebele*? I fear thinking that if this happens, am I not going to eat a meal half smaller than what I am eating today? As a result, I always fear what if the government makes a decision to redistribute land instead of us giving a small piece of land to our children? (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 12 Oct. 2012).

The above accounts demonstrate that indeed uncertainties and insecurity still remains implicating that the issue of improving tenure security requires more than land certification alone, as most of the apprehensions of landholders may not be adequately addressed in that way (Rahmato 2009: 181-228).

In particular, recent irrigation projects being introduced in Fogera *woreda* have resulted in increased uncertainty whether landholders within the catchment areas of the irrigation projects will maintain their holdings, given the fact that the regional land law allows the redistribution of lands to be developed with irrigation. In fact, when the redistribution of irrigated lands takes place priority will be given to those farmers whose land is taken away or its size reduced because of the irrigation projects. Accordingly, those farmers whose landholdings have been reduced or taken away are allowed to retain the portion of their choice (ANRS 2007) but it is obvious that they are likely to loose a portion of their landholdings as other farmers are also supposed to benefit from the irrigated lands. In the *woreda*, Rib and Gumara rivers are being utilized for irrigation. For instance, the Rib watershed irrigation project covers several *kebeles* in the *woreda*, and preparatory activities such as land measurements are already underway in the project area. Rumors were spreading in the areas of the project speculating the possible consequences that the project might bring. One informant explains that:

> Last year, land measurement was made on the lands surrounding this Rib area. Because of that, farmers in this area were very much worried. We were asking: "What is the purpose of this land measurement? Why are they measuring our lands?" Now we know that development of irrigation is going to happen in the area. But there is a fear for the reason that there are indications that farmers who have adjoining landholding in the area might lose part of their farmlands. In this case, the issue is that land redistribution might be undertaken. In order to enable everyone benefit from the irrigation

> services, a farmer from this area might be made to leave part of his land that he currently owns and move to another area, and other farmers to get land in this area. Even farmers further away also fear anticipating that the irrigation program might also extend to their areas too. The doubt is not because we will be denied a replacement to the land that might be taken away but the replacement will definitely be of poor quality and farther away (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 7 Dec. 2012).

Most of the informants and discussion participants held the opinion that their land may be taken away if the government wants to acquire it for various reasons, even in the presence of registered land certificates. As the preceding accounts by farmers illustrate, most of them were aware of the circumstances under which their security of tenure may come under threat. More than land registration, security of tenure actually exists in the minds of the landholders which implies the importance of their perceptions about whether their rights to a particular plot of land will be respected under any circumstances.

As the survey already demonstrated, the number of land related conflicts appears to be high in spite of the fact that the program of land certification is being implemented with the objectives of reducing land conflicts and protecting the land rights of farmers.

5.4 The nature of land disputes

Conflicts over land have been more numerous in Fogera *woreda* than in Tach Gayint (Table 5.1). It can be argued that the emergence of rice as the most important crop and the adoption of double cropping as well as the relative availability of (and unequal access to) land in the *woreda* have partly contributed to growing competition and conflicts over land access. Similarly, looking at the number of land dispute cases brought to the attention of the *woreda* court during the period 2008/09-2011/12 strengthens the argument that conflicts over land are pervasive in Fogera. There were on average about 464 land cases per year brought to the attention of the *woreda* court, a figure described by its chief judge as very high just for one *woreda* (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.3
Major categories of land-related court cases at the Fogera woreda court

Categories (nature) of land-related court cases	Number of court cases			
	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Disputes arising over claims of previous land sales	66	68	67	57
Boundary disputes	39	42	23	15
Land disputes related to divorce	16	20	14	13
Disputes related to land rental (e.g., disputes about the denial of rented land)	27	29	26	20
Land inheritance	79	84	112	93
Dispute over land rights (e.g., snatches, overlapping certificates)	213	219	191	163
Disputes over land exchange	33	30	30	15
Dispute over grazing lands	13	10	10	18
Total	486	502	473	394

Source: Fogera *woreda* court, 2013 collated by the author.

The land disputes have occurred at different levels of the socio-political hierarchy, which include disputes within the household (among family members), between households, between villages, and between farmers and local authorities.

5.4.1 Conflict within the household

In the study areas, access to land has become the main source of conflict within the household as its availability and access appear to have become increasingly constrained. Given the centrality of land to rural livelihoods, it is not surprising to see widespread disagreements and disputes over land affecting social relationships, including those between family members (see Peters 2002, 2004, 2013b for sub-Saharan Africa). According to the informants, the major land conflict that exists is the one that occurs between family members. In explaining the nature of such conflicts, one informant describes:

> For instance, a son asks his father to give him some land, taking it from what the household owns. However, the father responds saying "if I give you my land now, where am I supposed to find one for me?" Partly as a result of this and partly because the land has become so small today, a father and his children are quarreling these days. Mothers and their children are

> also fighting on a piece of land. When children request parents to share the land they have, there is nothing that the parents can do as they do not have enough even for themselves. For the reason that there is scarcity of land, brother against his own brother, a sister against her sister, a brother against his sister, a husband against his wife are continuously disputing over a piece of land. The conflict that happens amongst brothers and sisters within the family especially over their parents' land is the very serious one (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 8 Oct. 2012).

It is common practice that parents carve out a portion of their land for their children. Depending on their age, for example, the elder son might have taken more land and started a married life. The remaining brothers and sisters when they grow up challenge their elder sibling to share with them part of the land he received from their parents, and through this way family members compete with each other over land belonging to their parents. In other instances, the youngest child might get relatively larger land taking all the remaining land after the parents have already carved out portions of their land for elder children. Similarly, here again, the same dispute and quarrel occurs as the elder siblings ask to share the land that this last child of the family received. This is because some of the family members might perceive that they were unfairly treated and complain about discrimination or conspiracy, arguing that parents favored a particular member of the family. They demand equal sharing of the land between all family members. In this manner, siblings quarrel, compete and sue one another to get more land than one already received. One informant, who was the head of the household of 6 members, describes how it was disappointing to see tensions and disputes between family members:

> In our area, it has now become normal to see grown up children fighting with their parents over land. Brothers and sisters are suing each other and are commonly found in the court instead of their fields. You know everybody wants to have the land for himself. For me, I better die before this happens to my family. I really prefer passing away than seeing my children killing each other and becoming enemies to each other over my land. I have already carved out a piece of land to my elder son who got married last year…the rest of the children are now attending schools and I am hoping that they will not be farmers (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 15 Oct. 2012).

Conflicts also arise between parents and children, particularly sons, when those sons who had received a small plot of land from their parents consider the land they received is too small. As a result, they may thus

demand that additional land be given to them. Given the general scarcity of land, parents often do not satisfy such demands as they do not have enough even for themselves. One informant who had once faced such demand from his elder son describes the response he had to give to his son as follows:

> I am old and weak. I do not have the energy to work and sustain by myself. My land is my only hope remaining to sustain the rest of my life. However, my son, you are still young. You have the energy to do anything. You can get a work on day labor if you want to, or you can beg if you have to…. From now on, you have to and need to stand on your two feet and start helping yourself and your life. Otherwise, where do you think us –your mother and myself- have to go after giving you all the land? (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 10 Oct. 2012).

In the study areas, sharecropping and land rental arrangements take place between parents and sons. Given the prevailing tight conditions of access to land, parents tend to sharecrop or rent out land to their sons instead of allocating them land for their own independent use when they perceive that the remaining land may not enable to meet the needs of the rest of the family, or when the apportioning of land to a particular member of the family is considered to cause conflicts within the family. The implication is that there is not enough land to give to individual members of the family from which they can establish themselves independently, and this implies that not everyone in the family receives land. However, this practice has become, in certain cases, also a source of conflict. During the fieldwork, several cases of land conflicts between family members were found, especially between father or mother and their sons. It seems that sons after cultivating the land for a year or so through sharecropping arrangements made with their parents, tended towards claiming their rights over the land and insist to take over the land that they had been cultivating temporarily. Such a strategy has been used by adult children, particularly male children, to put parents under pressure in order to acquire a parcel of land for themselves. Under such circumstances, children argue that it is their legitimate right to claim their share of land from the family pointing to the fact that the allocation of land to households was undertaken based on the consideration of the number of household members.

The other type of conflict that occurs within the family is the one that relates to the succession of parents' land. Traditionally, land inheritance is patrilineal but current land laws and practices allow sons and daughters to

inherit the landholding of their parents. When parents pass away conflicts often occur among children as each of them claim to inherit the land belonging to their parents. Nowadays, whether the father or mother has promised to transfer the family land on inheritance to someone or passed away without making any will, it has become increasingly the main source of conflict between family members, especially upon the death of the father. In the cases where older sons and daughters had already been granted land while the parents were alive but still claim for an additional land, their claim is fiercely contested by the younger ones on the ground that the elders have already received their share. It is usually younger members of the family who shoulder the responsibility of taking care of parents during their old age and as a matter of fact, parents usually make promises to a person who takes care of them in inheriting their land upon death. But, under conditions of growing land shortage, this does not go uncontested by older ones and hence, claims for sharing of the land emerge regularly. As regards to the rural land law, it is clearly stated that not all children have equal rights to inheritance in which those children who are engaged in non-agricultural activities are not eligible heirs even in the absence of any other qualified heirs (ANRS 2007).[4] Accordingly, the law states that minor children are the primary legal heirs of the land of their deceased parents. In this legal framework, the right to land inheritance is determined on the basis of the principles of social welfare owing to the general condition of land shortage in which those individuals who are not engaged or do not wish to engage in agriculture as their means of livelihood are being excluded from legal inheritance.

Despite the land law that stipulates the conditions and priorities regarding land inheritance, all family members claim to have a share of their parent's land in any means possible. Even with a promise that, for example, the father makes to a person of his choice as his potential heir upon his death would spark conflicts between other members of the family. An elderly man explained one of the ways through which inheritance-related land conflicts occur among family members (Box 5.1).

Box 5.1
The dynamics of inheritance-related land conflicts

As everybody knows the value of land, there is no a single stone that would be left unturned to get some land. Let's say a household owns three or four *timads* of land while at the same time there are many children in the household. In the meantime, one of these children does this, or does that. He makes every effort, or even uses lies in order to convince his father or mother to get the land registration book that was made in their names transferred to his name. It doesn't matter; the name transfer can be carried out either after they pass away or while they are still alive.

Sometimes people make mistakes because of old age. For example, a father goes directly and tells to the people in the land administration committee that "my land belongs and should be given to this boy of mine. He has been washing my cloths. He has been serving me well. He has done this and that for me." Accordingly, the local land administration people give him the book it prepares by cancelling the old owner of the land in the document. And this way the land is transferred in the document as his name is put in the place of the old one. When the other children discover what has been done, they demand their share, and when the complaints reach to the concerned local land administration bodies the answer is simple 'it is your father or mother who gave the land to your brother', and then immediately all the problems follow. Then the others pick a fight arguing that how could this happened in which our right to the land is denied. Because land is life, these brothers will never meet or talk to each other again and, in some cases, these brothers get into serious conflicts to the extent of pulling a trigger against each other (Interview, Aboa kokit *kebele*, 17 Dec. 2012).

Cognizant of the sensitivity of their decisions, some parents wanted the promises for transferring their holdings to someone in inheritance to be kept in secret while they are alive. For example, during the fieldwork in Aboa-kokit *kebele* in Fogera it was possible to follow the case of one elderly farmer who had been coming to the local land administration and use office repeatedly, meeting him several times during visits to the office. He was there to transfer his holding right to one of his sons in a written testimony and he demanded that his decision would not be made public. As the land administration officer suspected that the decision of the person will isolate his other children from legal inheritance and is more likely to cause conflicts than resolve them, insisted that the will of this elderly farmer for transferring his holding would be made public to avoid future potential conflicts among all potential heirs.

Actually, making such issues known to the community is part of the administrative procedure in dealing with similar land cases. In light of widespread inheritance-related land conflicts, it has been the case that many parents indeed allocated their lands to heirs in a transparent and reasonable way while they are still alive so as to avoid potential conflicts between family members that may arise after their death.

Still another type of conflict over land within a family is the one that occurs between husbands and wives. Traditionally, adult sons receive a plot of land from their parents upon marriage on which they can establish their own household but marrying daughters do not get land from their parents. Thus a woman was not expected to move to her husband's house with some land from her parents and hence, simply depend on land belonging to her husband. An elderly informant explains this in short: "In our culture it used to be the case that the bride moves simply to the groom's house with empty hands, and she then becomes a landholder" (Fogera, Shina *kebele*, 9 Dec. 2012).

Coupled with the traditional practice of patrilineal inheritance, this traditional marriage pattern in which a woman usually moves to her husband's place appears to shape the conflicts that may arise, particularly in case of divorce. In the context of such traditional practices, couples might decide to get separated for various reasons and this will often involve the sharing of assets. As the woman did not bring any land into the marriage, the husband often refuses to share the land that they owned and have been using in common. Specially, if the landholding certificate was prepared in his name and if the wife's name was not listed in the certificate, the woman

is apparently in a vulnerable condition. Despite this, the wife claims to get a fair share from the land on which the family used to sustain itself. In a context where divorcing couples already had children, the wife insists that she deserves to share the land underscoring the fact that the land is needed to take care of the children. If the sharing of land is to happen by the divorcing couples, the proportion basically depends on the number of children, age of the children at the time of divorce and with whom the children are going to live. Under the current land law of the regional state, in the circumstances where the marriage occurred after the land holding certificate has been prepared and granted in the name of the husband, it is the couple's responsibility to apply for the amendment of the certificate to be prepared in the names of both of them upon their marriage (ANRS 2007).[5] This implies that each of the spouses are entitled to equal rights to the land since land registered in both of them is regarded as an equally shared holding. Nonetheless, the amendment of the landholding certificate will be made if only the husband agrees to do so.

In light of the current official policy and laws that provide equal rights to land to men and women as well as the prevailing context of land scarcity, changes have occurred in the local marriage patterns in which both of the spouses are now expected to bring some land into the marriage from each side. Nowadays, it has been increasingly become common practice in the study areas that a man would not marry a woman if she does not have some land. This implies that without land, it will be very difficult for a woman to find a husband, and therefore is likely to remain unmarried. If she finds someone to marry, it is less likely that she will get her name registered in the husband's landholding certificate as this depends on his willingness/agreement to make it an equally shared holding. This means that she will be probably not equally share the holding that is registered in the name of the husband in the case of divorce or death of the husband, especially if they do not have children together. This trend appears to have been used to a certain extent as an excuse for some men to pick up a fight against their wives' who had come into marriage without any land. One informant explains how men try to contest the status quo as regards to the land rights of wives in such contexts:

> You have been sharing and even owned and used my land though you did not come to me with any land of your own in the first place. Now, go and get your land… Your share! Go and get part of the land that belongs to your parents (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 9 Dec. 2012).

What this account demonstrates is that women are expected to bring some land belonging to their parents to be considered rightful holders of the land when they marry. Numerous disputes of this kind between a husband and a wife were found in the study areas during fieldwork.

5.4.2 Conflict between households over land rights and boundaries

Not only do conflicts over land occur within families but also such conflicts have been widespread between households in the study areas, especially in Fogera *woreda*. Conflicts over land rights and boundaries have been one of the main land related conflicts that occur between households. In the survey, of the households who had been involved in land disputes over the last five years, nearly 90% of them in each of the study *woredas* reported that the disputes were over land rights and boundaries with other households (Table 4.1). So what actually do these inter-household land conflicts look like? To a certain extent, disputes over land boundaries are partly related to the decreasing availability of land in the study areas. For example, a farmer, aged 34, explained:

> In the old days, the land referred as a border area between farm plots was a very wide area. It used to be as wide as the area that can allow paired oxen still under yoke to walk on it. Our elders tell us this boundary land was even like an extra land where oxen after every farm work used to graze on. Today, however, partly as a result of land scarcity, everyone took a piece from the land bordering their plot, pushing beyond the land they owned. As this practice has continued even today, this boundary land [unassigned strip of land] has almost disappeared to the extent of creating challenges in identifying the demarcation between farmlands that belongs to different persons. In other words, it has become almost part and parcel of individual farm plots (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 7 Dec. 2012).

When people push their plot boundary and start ploughing the unassigned strip of land separating their plots from that of their neighbors, in addition to its impact on affecting the boundary line, it also blocks transit corridors, which will eventually generate disputes. Generally, it is the case that plot boundaries in the study areas are often contested as the mechanisms by which boundaries are traditionally demarcated are based on approximate and movable boundary markers. As indicated in Table 5.4, some of the traditionally used boundary markers include trees, footpaths, streams/rivers and boulders, while leaving common ground as a boundary

marker between two adjoining plots. Table 5.4 specifies which types of boundary markers were used by farmers to identify their farmland boundaries.

Table 5.4
The types of boundary markers used by farmers

Land boundary markers	Study areas	
	Tach Gayint (%)	Fogera (%)
Streams/rivers/ponds	23.3	5.6
Footpaths	28.4	27.6
Trees/shrubs	39.0	30.6
Survey maps	0.7	0.0
Leaving common uncultivated land in between plots	53.4	91.8
Stone mounds	67.1	0.0

Note: Column totals exceed 100 because many respondents indicated multiple mechanisms to identify their farmland boundaries.

Source: Author's own survey, 2012

Table 5.4 shows that almost none of the sampled households in both study *woredas* use maps to identify the boundary of their plots. This is because plots boundary demarcation activities during the land registration and certification program have not relied on cadastral maps yet, and instead mainly relied on the use of traditional methods, which includes the use of relative locations to describe the identity of each plot. As a reflection on the land registration process of the country in general, Toulmin (2008: 16) noted "the simple technology used does not enable documentation of the size, boundaries and location of the plots, which limits usefulness of the land registration in solving border disputes".

Boundary related conflicts are not only limited to those between two individuals or households but such conflicts also arise between neighboring villages. FGD participants in Tach Gayint *woreda* (Enjit *kebele*) indicated that conflicts over village boundaries often occur between their village and the neighboring Dakka village, as explained in this quote:

> Conflicts often happen between these two villages even for a relatively minor cause like over reeds and grass used for thatching or making household items. Inhabitants of Dakka village seriously warn people from our village

> never to put our feet on their land in search of these items. Similarly, we do the same warnings not to come to our village. So the chance of these two villages to engage in conflict always exists as an inevitable potential. Sometimes, when unexpected incidents occur (e.g., animals cause damages to crops), this potential scales to conflicts involving many people from each side. Especially, wherever there is a common land that serves as a boundary between the two villages, people from each side of the border compete to cultivate it causing conflicts (Enjit *kebele*, 14 Oct. 2012).

Another informant added that:

> Sometimes our animals go down to the neighboring village [Dakka] for grazing, as their land is relatively wider than ours. However, they usually start a fight saying that the animals from our village entered in their farms causing damages. As a result, sometimes they go to the extent of hurting and killing our animals for pseudo-reasons. I personally have lost many of my goats, some killed and some disappeared. So there are a lot of fights related to land boundaries (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 14 Oct. 2012).

It appears that the boundaries between villages and between *kebeles* are mostly not clear which leads people living in adjacent areas to claim lands that separate their village from that of neighboring villages. This is the factor that has been generating disputes between villages fighting over a boundary.

One of the main issues that has been causing land conflicts between farmers is related to the issue of land exchange. Farmers voluntarily exchange their plots to one another for different reasons (e.g., proximity to homesteads). The land law of course allows the exchange of land holdings so long as such a practice does not lead to the "fragmentation" of holdings, and when an exchange of holdings is undertaken, such an exchange needs to be registered by the local land administration and use office. Nonetheless, this practice has been manipulated by some relatively wealthy and those with wider social connections to claim the land that actually belongs to poor people. Once an exchange of landholdings is concluded between two people, one of the persons involved in the land exchange arrangement comes up with a fake document that proves that the poor person sold him the land and tries to organize pseudo-witnesses that will testify in his favor. In this way, the actual exchange of plots is then presented as if the two persons did not exchange their plots rather one sold the land to the other. When such a case reaches the *woreda* court, the

person who claimed that he bought the land presents another document, this time from the *kebele*, which states that the disputed land is an exchanged land. This strategy is usually taken owing to the fact that land cannot be sold and bought which will make such claim invalid before the law. Even if the poor person is fortunate to win the case, the efforts that the *kebele* land administration committee undertakes to put the decision of the court into effect becomes complicated.

In addition to disputes that arise due to land exchange, there were many cases of land disputes in the study areas that have resulted from the sale of land in which lands sold in the past are now reclaimed by the sellers. In the Amhara region, as in the rest of Ethiopia, land is not legally bought or sold. However, even though land sales are prohibited, my evidence indicates that such transactions have been apparent in the study areas in which land was sold mainly out of distress. As one informant in Shina *kebele* explained: "We [the farmers] have heard and have been told and are well aware of the proclamation related to the prohibition of land sales. But some farmers still sell their lands in secrete hoping that they will get some money in order to solve the challenges they face" (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 11 Dec. 2012).

Another informant in Aboa-kokit *kebele* explains further:

> Of course the law says so. It forbids it. However, people face difficulties. They face troubles every day in life, and sometimes beyond the limit they can take. Specially some faced greater challenges such as shortage of money to pay back their debt they took in usury from rich people in the rainy/bad seasons. As a result, some people in our *kebele* sold their land either to pay back the money taken in usury or to deal with other challenges they faced despite the existing law. For instance, if a person or a parent has a grown-up child, according to our culture, it is the responsibility of the parents to fulfill some of the basic things to help this grown-up child to start a married life of his own. It might be financial expenses to buy a pair of oxen for a later farm work, or expenses for the wedding. For such and other similar reasons, a person who is left with no choice sells or rents out his land (Interview, Aboa-kokit *kebele*, 17 Dec. 2012).

Because land sales are illegal, the way it has been practiced is secretive and often under the cover of the practice of land rental. It is common that mainly poor farmers lacking necessary assets or inputs other than land

tend to sharecrop or rent out their lands to the relatively better-off, when they are in need of cash, grain, or when they lack other required resources (such as oxen, seed or labor) to use their land fully and effectively (Teklu 2004, Adenew and Abdi 2005). In certain instances, land rental contracts are informally made for a longer period of time, the situation in which some farmers consider it a kind of informal land sale, especially due to the uncertain prospects of the future given the fact that the land rental contract is made for many years. In this case, the implication is that land transfers that appear to be rentals are sometimes redefined as sales. This is evident in the following account from a farmer in his early forties:

> Presently, there is land rental and this has been used to sell land internally. In other words, land selling currently is happening under the cover of land rental. The law of the government allows an individual to rent his land. It allows to rent out for 15 years or longer. So what is presently exercised is the so called practice of land renting. But when the core of this practice of land renting is closely seen, it is in reality land selling. One person may say that he has rented out his land. In reality, however, he has sold it out. The land is sold. It is gone. This is so because who knows what will come after 15 years? Nobody knows for sure the land law that will come. The other person [buyer] might be forced to leave the land. Or this person [seller] may remain without any land as he has already given away his land. Or else, the land might be returned to him. That is why on the surface it looks like as if he is giving away his land for rent, but at closer look, he is only selling it. It is said that the land is for rent just for the reason that the land law is against land sales (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 6 Dec. 2012).

Nevertheless, starting from 2003 when the land registration and title certification program was being carried out in the region, the government announced that all land sold should be returned to its original holders. Following this, those people who had sold their landholdings some time ago used this as an opportunity to change their minds and thus, cancelled the land sales, leading to land disputes. As the previous users reclaimed their sold lands without compensating the 'buyers', many conflicts have arisen as those people who have bought land insisted to keep using these lands. Accordingly, while land sales were practiced both before and after the last land redistribution program, much of the land sold after the last land redistribution has been returned to their previous holders following the proclamation. However, land sold before the land redistribution was not returned as the land title registration was already made in the names

of the people who bought the lands. Taking the government's stance as an opportunity in which land that was sold should be returned to its original user, some people claimed that they had sold the land to people who presently use the lands. Informants contend that this has also provided a loophole for some people to falsely claim land, which was not originally theirs. This is mainly done through organizing own false or pseudo witnesses who would testify that they were present at the sale even to extent where no land sales in fact happened. One of my informants in Shina *kebele* stated that while it was clear that the government ruled all land sales void, this ruling, nevertheless, is not limited in time, in which people bring old cases including the ones that were sold before the last land redistribution.

Many informal land sales have also occurred even after land registration, increasing the number of disputes over land in the study areas. In some cases, a farmer agreed to "sell" his land promising that he will never break his deal even though the land formally remains his legal holding since the title registration was already made in his name. After some time and actually after spending the money, however, the seller tries to claim the land back threatening to take the case to the court in light of the fact that all land sales will be ruled void by the court and local authorities. Looking through the records of land cases in the *woreda* court provides a clear evidence of this sort (see Table 5.3). During the past few years, land conflicts were high as people contest past land transfers in order to reclaim their land regardless of whether past transfers constituted a long-term rental or a sale. When conflict arises as a result of such cases of land sale denial, local elders often try to resolve the dispute by telling the buyer to leave the land to the original user as the title of the land is still registered in the seller's name. One local elder interviewed in Fogera (Shina *kebele*) argued that "The buyer has to leave the land. What can you do as long as the law has it?" In some cases, local elders also tried to settle such conflicts by suggesting to the buyer to pay the same amount of money again. If such arbitration is successful, the person who had sold the land goes away with the money paid for the second time. However, this may not be the end and it does not guarantee long-lasting solution to such dispute as the owner of the land (the seller) might come back either for more rounds of payments or to reclaim the land in the excuse of the land law. One informant, who had once sold one of his plots, explains that:

> It's true that I had sold my land few years ago to cover my immediate needs under the presence of local elders as witnesses. And indeed I have already

> spent the money. Now, if the law gives it to me… if it helps me, I have broken my deal/oath. …That I had denied my agreement about the land sale. What am I supposed to do if the land proclamation says so? I can't be above the law of the government. So I changed my mind and claimed back my land of course through long battle (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 6 Dec. 2012).

One of the issues that actually complicate the conflicts that have resulted from such land sales was the difficulty related to recovering the money already paid to the seller when the land sale is cancelled. This is because, despite being aware of its illegality, people resort to selling their land mainly out of distress which makes it difficult to reclaim the money back as the seller may already have spent the money. Cases of this kind were evident in the study areas.

5.4.3 Battle over communal lands: highly contested terrain?

So far, the discussion has focused on disputes regarding individual landholdings, but there have been also many disputes over communal lands in the study areas. In rural Ethiopia, as in most of sub-Saharan African countries, communal lands (grazing lands, wetlands and forests) provide a range of vital functions to rural people in supplementing their livelihoods. In the study areas, there are growing pressures on communal lands, leading to their degradation as well as conflicts over their access and use. While disputes over communal lands have occurred in both of the study areas, the extent of such disputes varies considerably. With respect to conflicts over grazing rights on communal lands, only 6% of the sampled households in Tach Gayint *woreda* indicated experiencing such a conflict while this figure is much higher in the case of Fogera in which about 37% of the households said to have been affected by conflicts over grazing rights. These conflicts reveal the competing objectives pursued by individual members in the study areas in terms of gaining access to and use and management of communal lands.

Compared to Tach Gayint *woreda*, there is higher availability of communal land within Fogera *woreda*. The findings from the survey seems to support this phenomenon, in which 87.5% of the sampled households in Fogera reported having access to communal land as compared to 44% in Tach Gayint *woreda*. Until about 15 to 20 years ago, a large part of the Fogera plain surrounding Lake Tana was used predominately for grazing of livestock. Historically, this seasonal flood plain was not valued for crop cultivation. In recent years, however, this has been changing particularly

since the introduction of rice into the area and it was only recently that the plain was largely brought under rice cultivation (see Chapter 2). Due to its favorable ecological conditions, there has been an increase in the cultivation of rice and horticultural crops in the area. Looking at the trends of rice production on the Fogera plain over the last two decades leaves a strong impression of this change. Over the period 1993 to 2011, the total amount of land brought under rice cultivation on the plain increased from 6 hectares producing 160 quintals to 16,070 hectares producing 1,166,473 quintals (Fogera *woreda* Office of Agriculture, 2012). The changes on the Fogera plain since rice cultivation began are visually apparent to anyone familiar with the area earlier. Before the introduction of rice and of course double cropping, food security was a challenge as most of the households on the plain rarely cultivated enough crops for the annual subsistence needs of their families and thus migration to other areas was particular for the area. These changes in turn resulted not only in driving up the value of land but also the intensification of competition over access to and use of communal lands which were hitherto used as seasonal cattle grazing grounds. A farmer in his sixties puts it in perspective:

> What we can say is that a land that was once nothing but a bare and left land where the water used to rest has been cultivated to give a better product. The harvest it has been giving has been good enough and today, it has completely changed our life and the way we live. All this has happened just for the reason that a new crop called rice was introduced and cultivated on the very land of Fogera which used to be seasonally flooded (Shina *kebele*, 9 Dec. 2012).

As the land has become more valuable, but its availability getting constrained, there has been increased competition and conflicts, centered on the conversion of available communal lands to farmland, which seems to have been disrupting social relations. One informant in Shina *kebele* explains:

> The assumption regarding this communal land was to use it in common, so that our animals could graze on it. However, people from all directions are pushing against the edge of the common land and are taking part of the land that belongs to the community just for personal use. This situation, as a result, has become a hot issue and big enough in causing some serious conflicts amongst each of us in the community in this area (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 10 Dec. 2012).

With the increase in rice cultivation, some farmers within the study areas have managed to acquire additional land from the communal lands in what was formerly a grazing area. Particularly, some villages with vast wetlands like Shesher, Ayika and Girat have come under cultivation more recently and their use is one cause of conflict between individual farmers in the surrounding villages, and between farmers and local authorities. These are some of the examples where more competition and conflicts have been occurring, particularly over wetlands found in the areas which are now under high demand. An informant, who is a land administration officer, illustrates:

> What has been happening in these villages is that many people have illegally taken pieces of land from the communal land and have been cultivating it for their own private benefit. Despite the border of their land holdings, they push their border day and night and go beyond their holdings and cultivate part of the communal land. The government together with the rest of the community, has been trying hard to stop this illegal invasion of the communal land, but failed as the situation is found to be more serious than expected. Neither the *woreda* administration nor the police could handle and solve the troubles that the communities of these villages have been causing against the communal land. They are still found creating more and more problems and controversies related to this land (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 13 Dec. 2012).

Once the rainy season is over and the water starts to recede, the farmers just sow teff on the wetlands without ploughing it since using the wetlands normally do not require much work. In fact, farmers do not want to commit themselves in putting much work on such lands that are accessed illegally because of the uncertainty that they might be forced to leave anytime. Due to the pervasive nature of invasions into communal lands, the *woreda* administration had established an ad hoc task force comprising representatives from sector offices, including the justice office and the police force to evict those people who have been illegally cultivating such communal lands in villages such as Shesher. One of the decisions made was to let cattle graze on the crops already planted on such fields. During an interview with the chief inspector of Fogera *woreda* police, it was revealed that when the ad hoc committee reached to Shesher wetland area to claim back the lands that have been illegally cultivated, villagers surrounding the wetland opened fire in defiance forcing the ad hoc task force to retreat and the farmers vowed not to leave the land (Interview, Woreta town, 31 Jan.

2013). In addition, in Nabega *kebele*, bordering our case study *kebeles*, given the availability of large tracts of communal lands, most if not all of the farmers in the kebele were alleged for illegally cultivating such lands that should belong to the community for common use (ibid.). It was said that the villagers of that specific area have united in some kind of conspiracy in which no one dares to expose those individuals who are illegally using the communal lands. Although local authorities repeatedly called against the invasions into the communal lands, they were not able to take any effective actions on those individuals involved in such activities. Furthermore, because of the recognition of their immense ecological services, wetlands have recently become the focus of local environmental conservation activities by the *woreda* line sector offices and an NGO that focuses on sustainable management and conservation of these resources.[6] Farmers, the NGO and the government have different and conflicting perceptions and interests in relation to the wetlands, which are linked to different uses. On the one hand, the wetlands are seen as good quality agricultural land by farmers while on the other hand, conservation NGOs and the local government see such lands as an ecological asset that needs to be protected.

In Fogera *woreda*, local government authorities were also alleged for illegally ploughing the communal land that belonged to the community for themselves or conspired with their relatives in cultivating it. During the interviews in Shina *kebele*, it was emphasized that when people find a post in the *kebele* administration, through manipulating their authority, they often hurry to take part of the communal land and use it for their personal gain, while the interests of the community in general are ignored. For example, one informant in Shina *kebele* revealed that the chairperson of the land committee had been illegally cultivating and had built two houses on part of the land that was supposed to be communal grazing land of the *kebele* (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 2 Dec. 2012). The informant underscored that the community had complained to the *woreda* administration but the administration had 'deaf ears' to the concerns raised. In addition, the former administrator of Shina *kebele* also appropriated land from the communal land while he was in office in which he was later made to leave the land that he acquired using his government position. One of the key issues that informants and discussion participants stressed was the way how and by whom cases related to communal lands are handled. In this regard, it has been the trend that the *kebele* administrator is the one in charge of looking

after issues related to the communal lands and who can take the cases to the court. This procedure is problematic when the administrators themselves are the ones appropriating the communal lands. When the community of a village takes the case of an illegally taken land from the communal land to the court, the question of representation becomes the challenge. FGD participants in Shina *kebele* argued that:

> When we try to take such cases to the court, the court simply says that this is the responsibility of your *kebele* administrator and only him who can argue on behalf of the community about the communal lands. …We know that it is the administrator, however, who is selling and giving away our communal grazing lands. Here comes the problem. …When we expressed our concerns, we were told that it is the *kebele* administrator who should be concerned about the issue of such lands. Who are you to be concerned about the communal land? Because of this challenge,… with a lot of efforts and of course through the help of the people who are his relatives and friends we begged our *kebele* administrator to give us at least a delegation for the communal land cases. We begged. Just to get the delegation. After long process, we were given the delegation. We have been arguing now for more than four years to get back our communal lands illegally taken by individuals, as our grazing area is diminishing rapidly (Shina *kebele*, 9 Dec. 2012).

A similar point was made by an informant in Aboa-kokit *kebele*:

> All the problems related to the land issue always happens in the *kebele*. These people who used to be administrators in the kebele, more than anyone else, know very well how the system works. They are very conscious of how the bureaucracy is carried out (Interview, Abo-kokit *kebele*, 16 Dec. 2012).

Some local authorities have used their government positions, political power, and better understanding of the land administration system to appropriate part of the community lands for their own private use – either by simply cultivating such lands on their own account or by conspiring with people with whom they have close ties.

As the pressure on communal grazing lands mounted, and so too are the attendant disputes, communities in the study areas have been creating institutions to deal with the issue and regulate access in order to prevent perceived problems of degradation and unsustainable levels of use and prevent conflicts between users. Traditionally, livestock are let to graze freely on the communal grazing lands as well as on crop residues on individual fields after harvest. Although grazing lands are relatively abundant

in Fogera, it has now become the ground for tension, necessitating the need for local arrangements for regulating access as expansion of arable land and encroachments to such lands are causing challenges. One important arrangement emerging in the study areas was the prohibition of open (loose) grazing to reduce the pressure on the available communal land, in which people in the village agree to keep their livestock at home and feed them by cutting grass from the communal lands. The grass is protected to grow which will later be cut and shared between the members of a particular village. An informant in Shina *kebele* explains "We used to let our animals free to the communal land and allow them graze on it all day without any limit. But, now the community discussed and agreed that we should forbid loose grazing and instead cut the grass from it and feed our animals while keeping them at home" (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 13 Dec. 2012). However, it was indicated during FGD discussions that the implementation of this practice becomes problematic and becomes a source of conflict when other people from neighboring villages kept on letting their livestock to such protected communal grazing lands. It is contended that only households that are 'registered' in that particular village can use the communal grazing land found in the village in which those who are not members of that village are not allowed anymore to access the grazing lands. This stance has been one source of conflict between users from neighboring villages. For example, within Shina *kebele* there are relatively wider grazing grounds (namely Ayika, Aleka medir, and Ayisetugn), which were hitherto commonly used by households within Girbesha village and others coming from the surrounding villages. Recently, however, the villagers of Girbesha village banned users who are not members of their village from accessing these grazing grounds. This is causing conflicts between members of Girbesha village and members from the neighboring Ameshkela village as the later claimed that the grazing lands available in their own village is so small and thus insisted to continue accessing the communal grazing grounds found in neighboring Girbesha village. Generally, communal grazing lands constituted one of the main sites of land contestations in the way noted above over governance and the distribution of such resources between villages. However, it has to be noted that "the power to determine access and ownership of resources represents a more fundamental and deep-rooted motive for conflict than the simple distribution of the resources themselves" (Derman et al. 2007: 25). Particularly, the widespread conflicts over communal lands reveal conflicts over how

rights of use and access to these resources are defined, negotiated, and contested within and between individual households, villages and local authorities. As Peters (2013b: 11) describes "social conflict over land produces stricter definitions of those with legitimate claims to resources, that is, group boundaries become more exclusively defined", which in turn lead to or exacerbate social divisions and tension (see also Peters 2002, Peters and Kambewa 2007 for Malawi).

5.5 Local governance and land conflict

A discussion on the politics and structure of land governance deserves a particular attention in order to understand the dynamics of land administration and land-related conflicts. The notion of 'land governance' goes beyond technical and administrative matters around land to include key issues about 'democratizing' access and control over political power or the political economy of land (Borras and Franco 2010b). The concept underscores the political nature of land issues. As defined by Borras and Franco (2010b: 23), 'land governance' is:

> a political process that is contested by multiple state and societal actors to control the nature, pace, extent and direction of access to, control over, and use of land…, and is inherently part of the broader and strategic challenge of democratizing the state and society. It includes administrative and technical processes such as efficient land records and titles, but goes beyond these, to include the fundamental question of land-based wealth and power (re) distribution.

The country's Constitution enacted in 1995 stipulated state ownership over all land, and regional states have primary authority over who gets to use the land. The provisions included in the constitution, which were further delineated by successive federal land laws, allocated the authority to administer land and other natural resources directly to the regional states. Although there is no a federal government institution that was mandated for land policy, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD) has been responsible in coordinating rural land issues. At the level of regional state, the Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use (BoEPLAU) has been set up and given the responsibility of administering rural land, though previously this was situated within the Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development. The bureau has

its representative offices at zonal, *woreda* and *kebele* levels for a decentralized land administration as part of the general processes of government decentralization. At local levels, the issue of land administration is mandated to *woreda* and *kebele* administrations in which rural land administration committees are established in each *kebeles* and sub-kebeles. According to this rural governance structure for land administration, land administration committees are given with the responsibility of administering the land found in their respective *kebele*. These local level (*woreda* and *kebele*) authorities have decision-making powers including land use decisions, carrying out land redistribution, land registration and certification as well as the authority to alienate and expropriate land for a variety of purposes.[7] For example, regional land proclamation No.133/ 2006 (article 28) states that the *woreda* administration has the authority to expropriate land from any holder if the land in question is needed for public use or if it is deemed important that the land is leased to private investors. Although local administrative bodies have decision-making powers of various degrees over such issues, their planning activities and decisions are overseen by higher level authorities at zonal and regional offices. While the decentralized land administration system put in place has been seen as part of the broader democratization process where development efforts are being brought closer to local communities and make service delivery more efficient and effective as well as helps to build politically engaged citizens, the issue is more complex and there are causes for concern with regard to political and bureaucratic maladministration and corrupt practices, both in general terms and within the land administration systems.

In light of the widespread land-related disputes in the study areas, the role of local government is important both because this is the level of political structure of the state with which rural people commonly interact, and because apparently rural dweller's capacity to pursue land claims and make effective use of their land are more likely to be subject to local level practices. It was emphasized in individual interviews and group discussions that it is the land administration committees that are mainly involved in the land conflicts occurring in the study areas. In fact, one of the main causes of the conflicts exists within the land committees themselves. As one informant in Shina *kebele* (Fogera *woreda*) explains:

> Related to land administration, when it comes to the government, it has undertaken land title registration in our area. When land was registered, it was said that once and for all, there would be no more accusation because

> of land issues. …we have been told that conflicts, disputes and accusations because of land would be resolved for good. Now, however, let alone ceasing to exist, the dispute and the conflict over land have grown and expanded more than any time before. And this has a lot to do with how things are being done with regard to land administration (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 4 Dec. 2012).

Similar point was also made by some FGD participants in Aboa-kokit *kebele* (Fogera *woreda*):

> When previously land registration was implemented in 2003 in our area, we were confirmed that there would not be any more quarrels, conflicts, naggings and disputes in the court. Besides, it was said that using the land ownership book, no matter a father or a parent passes away, children whose names have been registered in the document would have a full right to succeed and then share among themselves and use the land that belongs to their parents. Starting then, however, let alone stopping it, all the disputes and conflicts because of land have increased and worsened more than or beyond what we had expected (Aboa-kokit *kebele*, 16 Dec. 2012).

When asked about the reasons or the possible causes that have made the disputes grow and expand, the informants and discussion participants underscored the important role of local government officials who are able to exploit and manipulate the decentralized land administration system. Particularly, landholders challenged the decision-making power given to land administration committees. As one informant describes:

> Our community, as it is known very well, is very much tied and related based on kinship or affiliation. Likewise, the land administration committee works in a similar way the community functions. The land committees carry out their tasks mostly based on affiliation. In fact, some concerned people tell us that these people in the rural land administration committee were elected from and by the community itself. Yes, that is true. We elected these people. However, we are also saying that there has become a situation in which things are carried out based on affiliation and kinship. It has become a situation in which personal benefits come before the interest of the community who elected them to serve its interests (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 10 Dec. 2012).

This has particularly become possible since local government authorities have decision powers over land matters at local levels. Although this has been essential for empowering local communities, it has sometimes

provided a fertile ground for various forms of abuse of power. The abuse of power is partially related to the implementation of the land rights registration and certification process.

As indicated elsewhere, the last land redistribution in Amhara region took place in 1997, and this has been used as a benchmark for the land registration and certification process undergoing throughout the region since 2003. As interviews with key informants in Fogera *woreda* revealed the 1997 land redistribution document (protocol), referred as 'volume A', is now full of cancelations and cross outs. This situation is said to have caused conflicts as various *woreda* officials who had held office at different times since then deliberately gave someone's land to somebody else by changing the name that was originally found in the document. One official from Fogera *woreda* explains as follows:

> There was this document called 'volume A'. It is this document that contains the actual list of the beneficiaries of last land redistribution in our area. However, as a result of the malpractices and corrupted actions of the then administrators, this document is almost destroyed in which the names of numerous actual landholders were replaced by the names of new holders in the years after the last land redistribution occurred. It is full of cancellations…. This situation had caused very serious problems and made the land certification process very difficult in our *woreda*. There were people who lost their jobs because of this. A lot of people who were *woreda* land administrators were removed from their posts. It was believed that they intentionally damaged the document for various reasons. Such things are being carried out through the power of money, kinship and friendship (Interview, Woreta town, 30 Jan. 2013).

As the above account illustrates, a reliable record that can be used as a reference to land certification process is lacking in Fogera *woreda* which in turn resulted in conflicting evidence on landholding rights. Such maladministration and corrupt practice is an indication of the scale of abuse of power and the extent of official involvement in causing land conflicts. In my study areas in Fogera, there were numerous cases where overlapping land certificates were issued for two persons on a plot of land, and this has been causing conflicts. As a result, although the land title registration process has been conducted through locally elected land committees, their activities were supported by evidence from those people who participated in the last land redistribution as the main document that could have been

used as a benchmark is deliberately damaged. Even after the land certificates are issued to landholders, land committees are given the responsibility of investigating and checking the land titles registered, particularly when disputes occur because of overlapping claims over a parcel of land. As some well-connected people can easily get the land certificates over the land already allocated and registered to another person or over the land that belonged to the community, these land committee people were supposed to do an investigation and cross-checking again.

This practice, however, appears to have weakened the credibility of the land certificate (and diminished perceived tenure security) among poor people who felt vulnerable to corrupt practices because the scope for manipulation is substantial if certificates that had already been legally issued could not be presented as an evidence. Although opinions varied, it has been argued by many informants and discussion participants in Fogera *woreda* that the fact that the land title certificate cannot been considered as dependable and adequate evidence before the court, in case of disputes arising from overlapping claims, is viewed as the main reason that has made land-related conflicts to increase more than ever before in the area. Exploiting their local kinship ties as well as positions in social and political relations and structure, some people were able to get land registration certificates illegally over the same land that has been legally owned by other people. In Fogera *woreda*, for example, there is evidence that some people who had previously worked in land committees and in village social courts have kept copies of official paper with letterhead and legal stamps on it for later use after they leave office and used it later as if they were original ones. As one informant, who is a local militia in Shina *kebele*, explained that these white papers with stamps on them and which are kept for future use have been especially used when it is known that the actual holder of the land has died (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 1 Dec. 2012). Subsequently, by putting the name of another person on the blank spaces on the paper, it has been presented as an evidence to claim the land that belonged to the deceased, causing conflict with the family members. Such mischiefs have not only targeted the land of the deceased but also those of the poor, especially those with limited local kinship links and other resources to defend their land rights. It is this sort of actions that led some to argue that indeed adverse impacts should be expected from land registration processes as "elite groups may seek to assert claims over land which was not

theirs….leaving local people to find that the land they thought was theirs has been registered to someone else" (Toulmin 2008: 15).

Before the land certificates were prepared, at the initial phase of the land registration process, a piece of white paper was used to register the holdings of individuals in accordance with the last land redistribution and later based on the information described on these white papers, the hard-covered certificates (a small green book) on which photographs of the holders are attached, known as primary book of holding is then issued.[8] Cognizant of their values, these white papers, which are intentionally kept under poor conditions so that they appear old and real, have been used by former committee members to benefit their own relatives or others to which they are affiliated in one way or the other. Such cases have resulted in overlapping land claims and conflicts. The following account from a focus group discussion explains the situation:

> What happens is that by asking or referring to people from long past, some of whom passed away and some still living, in their names signatures are being placed on a white paper with official stamp indicating or proving that the person whose name is filled in the blank paper owned the land as if since long ago. This paper is then used to claim the land that is currently owned by another person. Eventually, people get into serious conflicts. Once, the *woreda* administration intervened to find out the source of these papers and many of these papers were discovered and confiscated. It was found out, for example, that just one person alone kept 103 copies of such papers. However, a lot more similar papers still exist in the villages and are kept hidden somewhere even today. There are people who were caught doing this mischief. These include people who were ex-members of social court (*Mahiberawi shengo*). These people say that they made such decisions while they were in their posts although everybody knows this is a mischief done now…. We believe that this is the most complex challenge that exists related to land conflicts (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 9 Dec. 2012).

This account illustrates some of the mechanisms through which fake evidence (in the form of documents) is produced to claim land that belongs to poor people in the villages, generating conflicts as the following case also suggests. Adena is a woman who held half hectare of land in Shina *kebele* and has been using since the time of the last land redistribution, until it was claimed by another person. The person contested her land claiming that he has legitimate holding rights over it although she has the land registration certificate at her hand. When the case reached at the

woreda court, she presented the land certificate as an evidence to testify that it is her legal holding. The *kebele* land committee was then made to investigate her land case and finally, the land was said to be not hers despite the fact that she was still holding all the relevant evidence at her possession. She firmly believes that she was cheated and denied justice and insisted that the outcome was the result of corruption. During the time of interview, she was seeking assistance from the Fogera *woreda* office of women's affairs to help her to get back her land. She argued that had the court considered the certificate as adequate evidence, the other person could not have taken her land unfairly using his links with land committee members who have decided the case in his favor. This was the concern most frequently mentioned by focus group discussion participants in Fogera study areas. The following quote, for example, captures the sentiment of discussion participants in Shina *kebele*:

> ….So, what we are trying to say is that, why aren't we considering the land ownership book as evidence? What is the need of having the land book then? That is why we say this book is not giving any use in reality. It is nothing, just a mere paper. Otherwise, if this land book is made to stay and rectified according to the original land redistribution document, if it is said, here is the evidence, what is the need of any other witness to testify? Then we would become the real owners of our land. Otherwise, we are simply carrying the book. It is not giving any use. This book rather is a failure as anyone who is rich, smart and has all the connections with people in land administration office, can easily get it over the land that belong to the poor or communal land (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 9 Dec. 2012).

Similarly, another informant in Aboa-kokit *kebele* explains further:

> Since 1997, the issue of land has been hot and new every day. It was on the basis of the 1997 land redistribution that land registration was later carried out in 2003. The land problems, however, still exist today and are found well intensified. If the land registration was carried out properly and then accepted as a final decision,…. if a land book was prepared to each and every piece of land, all the current disputes and fights could not have occurred. Whether the land one received was small or big, he could have returned home accepting in peace the land that was given to him. Today, contrary to this, the preparation of the land ownership book and its distribution is being late and is very slowly carried out, while taking longer than it should have taken. It is not yet given to all of us. What is worse is that even the land

> ownership books prepared and distributed among the farmers have not reduced these land disputes and conflicts. The reason is that a gap is commonly being observed between what was listed on the book and the reality found out there, for which conflicting evidences are being presented (Interview, Aboa-kokit *kebele*, 16 Dec. 2012).

One main challenge that has come a subject of much concern today with regard to land disputes in Fogera was the issue of organizing kin or close friends as witnesses so that they will be inclined to support one when somebody else's or part of the communal land is being claimed. Many of the informants assert that the way land issues are handled, including land registration and certification process, preservation of evidence related to the last land redistribution, and dealing with land conflicts, has been open to various kinds of malpractices affecting particularly women's land rights and those of the poor. Nonetheless, "vulnerable persons who are evidently well-informed may resort to written procedures to protect rights which they know are being increasingly threatened" (Andre and Platteau 1998: 34).

5.6 Systems of land conflict resolution

Regarding land conflict resolution systems it is important to understand the dynamics of court structures and jurisdictions, as well as the politics of local power structures so as to gain understanding of how rural people use existing judicial systems to protect their land rights when they are threatened. When disputes amongst themselves occur, rural people traditionally relied on social dispute settlement mechanisms in which they are resolved through the mediation of local elders and religious leaders.

The lowest judicial system established to hear a wide range of rural matters including land disputes was the *kebele* social court. The social courts were limited to cases involving issues not exceeding a value of 1,000 Birr (Rahmato 2009). The judges in social courts are locally elected people that are similar to those local elders and community leaders who serve in traditional dispute resolution forums. However, social courts operate with a clear set of rules and procedures with a simplified version of the same law applied in higher courts as the objective of their establishment was to expand rural people's access to justice (Witten 2007). Nonetheless, with the Amhara land proclamation No. 133/2006 the responsibility of land

dispute settlement was shifted from the social courts to land administration committees through which the assembly of local arbitrators is established. It is the responsibility of the *kebele* land administration committee to establish local arbitrator's assembly comprising of representatives from each sub-kebeles. Parties to a land dispute can take their case first to the land administration committee. As a first preferred option, the assembly of local arbitrators then encourages disputants to settle their disputes through negotiations. Once the disputants consent to be arbitrated by the assembly, they cannot appeal on the disputes already resolved by it. However, in situations where the dispute cannot be resolved at this level, the case would directly be forwarded to the *woreda* court. In other words, if one of the disputing parties does not agree with resolution proposed by the local arbitrators, he/she can take the case to the *woreda* court, after receiving a letter from the assembly of local arbitrators that states the local efforts made to resolve the case and consequently, suggesting that the case has to be seen at the *woreda* court. While the tendency towards formalizing traditional conflict mediation mechanisms as a system of resolving conflicts locally is acknowledged, Rahmato (2009) asserts that the practice of selecting local conflict mediators through the land administration committees could affect their impartiality as the election of the land committee members itself maybe politicized.

Despite the role of local arbitrators in settling land disputes, the number of land cases that were taken to *woreda* courts, particularly in Fogera *woreda*, appears very high. In interviews and group discussions, it was expressed that land-related disputes are primarily taken to the land administration committees to be mediated by the assembly of local arbitrators. However, because of the complex nature of the disputes that have been occurring in the area such cases could not be easily resolved and thus many of them go to the *woreda* court. But as many of the informants expressed even if the cases are taken to *woreda* courts, they are sent back to the *kebele* land administration committee seeking further investigations and follow-up on the cases. The informants contend that it is not the *woreda* court that is currently making decisions on the land cases. It is rather the people in the land administration committee who are actually making the decisions. One informant in Shina *kebele*, for example, explains how this is done:

> Once a land case is opened at the *woreda* court, the court then orders the land administration office to investigate on the case. Here, in order to make a fair decision, the court should have considered the evidence in the hands

> of the poor person [disputant] or the land registration document in the *woreda* land administration and use office. Instead of doing this, the court rather writes to the rural land administration committee for their say on the case. As rural communities are very much tied based on kinship or so, it is clear that this committee also works in a similar way, affecting the trustworthiness of their decisions. For this reason, the decision of this committee makes a poor person lose a case despite the fact that there is no any fair way that this person could lose. The court doesn't know what is being carried out related to this case. The committee people say that they have investigated and made people to testify on the case and send their findings to the court with a sealed envelope. Based on the committee's findings, the court makes its decision. …Here decisions are made based on witnesses who did not testify appearing in front of the court and their testimonials are only brought to the court in secret. As a result of the wrongdoings or mistakes being committed by these committee people, the court even gives land away to individuals from the land that belonged to the community. This is happening because of the poor and unfair decisions that those people in the land administration committee make based on various benefits they get and their intention of benefiting their own relatives or people they know. When land registration was made, we were told that any land dispute would be seen through the social courts in each *kebele* but this is now taken over by land administration committees. It was believed that taking the land case to the *woreda* court is better due to the perception that laws are equally applied to everyone and things are handled carefully there. In reality, however, the court is not taking a closer look at the land cases and at the whole procedure of how things are being carried out. It is rather the rural land administration committee that is presently dealing with this and making decisions, which is mostly done based on affiliation (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 10 Dec. 2012).

Although the *woreda* court is generally perceived reliable because it is assumed less subject to manipulations based on kin or affiliations, it has its own problems as the account above indicated, which suggests that the procedures being adopted have an impact on the outcomes – in particular on who gains and who loses. In addition to the shortcomings demonstrated related to how the court handles land-related cases, it has been also the case that these courts themselves are sometimes subject to political pressures, abuse of power and corruption. This is to argue that while the role of *woreda* courts has been important in overcoming some of the limitations associated with local dispute resolution mechanisms, the provision of appropriate justice system remains as the courts (and the officials within

them) are not free from the influence of local politics and of social and political relations to which they are embedded to that will generally affect the effectiveness of the formal judicial service at reducing or managing growing land related conflicts, and protecting the land rights of particularly those who lack power.

It was the existence of such experiences that resulted in an argument that "land rights for the poor are better secured through investing in systems for dispute resolution and access to justice, rather than by technical procedures to register land rights" (Quan and Toulmin 2004: 10). But addressing the justice needs of the rural poor in turn requires addressing "the inequitable power relations [in terms of class, ethnicity, age and gender] that impede access to justice" (Franco 2008a: 1858, see also Franco 2008b). The chief judge of Fogera *woreda* court, who was interviewed for this study, explained that the land administration and use office has been usually consulted on cases of land-related disputes brought before the court where it may provide information. The judge, however, acknowledged that the way information is gathered has been giving more say to local land administration committees, which in turn has large implications in shaping the outcome of the court's decisions and thus, it is a great concern (Interview, Woreta town, 7 Feb. 2013). In this regard, one of the most frequently raised complaint against the *woreda* court during interviews and discussions was that judges do not take a closer look and a deeper analysis on the land cases before making any decisions that affect individual's land rights. As Andre and Platteau (1998: 34) stated "it is worth emphasizing that official judges base their judgments on the evidence of written documents, whenever these are available. This is likely to favour educated persons and also dubious persons who do not hesitate to produce false documents or documents written under duress". One older farmer in Aboakokit *kebele* explained that he would prefer traditional conflict resolution mechanisms if the courts continue to rely just on the information they are provided by land committees.

> It is yet our strong belief that the court will take a closer look at the various land cases. So far, the court has not taken this situation into consideration for us. We blame the court severely for the reason that it has not fulfilled its duties and responsibilities or at least for it has not tried to bring into light the facts of our cases. Otherwise, we say that it could have been better if

> our cases were seen under the tree or under the shade through the community elders like the old days or in the traditional way (Interview, Aboa-kokit *kebele*, 16 Dec. 2012).

Indeed it appears, from FGDs held at different levels that rural people tend to favor more to be judged by the community elders, as their decisions are generally viewed as fair. This is partly for the reason that the elders being part of the community are thought to have adequate experience and know very well about the history and distribution of the land as well as culture of the community around. Accordingly, through arbitrating and making disputing parties talk and agree, especially those individuals who want to, these elders have been enabling farmers to stay at work than spending their time at the district court. Nonetheless, as one informant in Shina *kebele* explains there are also other people who bypass informal and traditional ways of dispute resolution available in the community and instead opt for formal court actions (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 6 Dec. 2012). These people are those who have convinced themselves partly for the reason that they know they can do a lot of influence using their financial power, relatives, and friends or any other people they are affiliated with at various levels of government administrations. It is also thought that poor people will not have the money to follow up the cases in the *woreda* court situated away from their villages.

In spite of the role of informal ways of dispute resolution or the role of local arbitrators established under the land committee, the absolute number of land cases brought to the courts over the last five years has been high (see Table 5.3). According to a court official in Fogera *woreda*, the court is being overwhelmed with rural land cases and at times, it becomes beyond the capacity of the court to deal with all the cases without delays. A litigant at Fogera *woreda* court, when asked about his own experience of going to the court, stated that it is a tiresome and expensive process for a farmer coming from rural areas in terms of cost and time required. He explained that let alone dealing with a personal land case, they have been arguing for more than four years on a communal land case that was illegally taken by individuals from the communal land that belonged to the community (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 6 Dec. 2012).

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter analyzed land tenure security and the dynamics and nature of land related conflicts in the study areas. It has demonstrated that land related conflicts have been more numerous in Fogera *woreda* than in Tach Gayint, challenging the dominant argument that conflicts over land are the direct outcome of land shortage given the fact that households in Fogera held, on average, 0.26 hectares more land than those in Tach Gayint. It is argued that land related conflicts are more numerous in Fogera partly because of the expansion of the cultivation of rice and the relative availability of arable land in the *woreda* supplemented by its greater agronomic potential. The conflicts generally manifested spatial variations that seem to implicate the importance of who has access to what land as the quality of land varied from one *woreda* to another. More importantly, problems surrounding local governance, both in general terms and within the land administration system appear to have been causing more conflicts over land.

Notes

[1] It will be explained later on that selling is actually illegal, but is done under the heading of long-term lease. However, this "solution" often leads to conflicts at a later stage.

[2] ANRS proclamation No. 133/2006 and regulation No. 51/2007.

[3] This formulation opens also legalized possibilities for land grab.

[4] Amhara Regional Land Administration Regulation No. 51/2007, Article 11.

[5] Regional Land Administration Regulation No. 51/2007, Article 20.6.

[6] Ethio-Wetlands and Natural Resources Association (EWNRA) is an NGO that has been working in the Fogera *woreda* with the objective of enhancing local capacity for sustainable use and conservation of wetlands.

[7] The regional land administration implementation guideline determines the roles and responsibilities of different actors over land matters (Regional land administration proclamation No. 51/2007, Article 25-28).

[8] The land holding certificate (Primary Book of Rural Land Possession) contains names and photo of the landholder (s) including name of spouse, family members and relations, identification number of land parcel (s) with their size and land use type, soil fertility status, names of neighbors, summary of the rights and obligations of landholders.

6 Local perspectives on the dynamics of land degradation in south Gondar zone

6.1 Introduction

Across developing countries, climate change is increasing the incidence and scale of drought, crop failure and livestock loss, and is accelerating water shortage, deforestation and land degradation and; millions of poor rural people are already being forced to cope with the impacts of these changes (UNDP 2007, IFAD 2010). As demonstrated in the previous chapters, land resources and rights to them are fundamental to the livelihoods of households in the study area (and indeed, elsewhere in rural Ethiopia). The degradation of land means that rural households encounter threats in their everyday efforts to meet their livelihood requirements. It has adverse impacts on their agricultural productivity and household food security. In Ethiopia, land degradation is generally perceived as a serious problem, particularly in many of its highland areas, where extensive deforestation, wide-scale soil erosion and nutrient depletion are associated with declining land/agricultural productivity (Campbell 1991, Hurni 1993, Shiferaw and Holden 1999, Ezra 2001, Bekele and Drake 2003, Bewket 2007, Amsalu and de Graaff 2007). Land degradation has been acknowledged as a serious problem that contributes to rural poverty and food insecurity. Nevertheless, it remains a contested issue that has not received much attention in the debate, particularly regarding the extent, underlying causes of, and possible countering measures to the problem.

As discussed in Chapter 3, land tenure security has been one of the key prominent issues in the debate over the causes of land degradation. It has long been argued that lack of tenure security affects land degradation, as the likelihood that land users will invest in land conservation, depends on their security of tenure (Feder and Feeny 1991, Besley 1995, Gavian and Fafchamps 1996). Many have argued that Ethiopia's land tenure system

lacks the tenure security required to stimulate investments for enhanced agricultural productivity and sustainable land use (Alemu 1999, Admassie 2000, Bewket 2007, Rahmato 2009). There is widespread criticism by scholars regarding the state's continued ownership of land, in which it is argued that it has created a high degree of tenure insecurity – which, coupled with other factors, is believed to be responsible for the lack of investment in land and the lack of effective environmental conservation (Alemu 1999, Admassie 2000, Rahmato 2009, Deininger and Jin 2006). However, the narrative that the farmers' lack of tenure security contributes to the widespread land degradation problem appears to be misleading in the study areas. As this chapter will later show, the state ownership of land does not seem to have discouraged farmers from taking care of their land or from responding to the problem of land degradation. Contrary to what has been widely accepted as a fact, this chapter suggests that farmers in the study area worry less about issues surrounding their tenure (in)security when it comes to land management, and are more concerned with the problem of land degradation and how to resolve it. That being said, while it remains to be seen whether the recent land registration and certification programme would increase their tenure security, the ways in which land users act or do not act towards their land seems to depend more on the circumstances and dynamics of their livelihoods rather than simply on land tenure security.

It is therefore important to focus on farmers' own perceptions, particularly their understanding and interpretation of land degradation and its causes. This is being done by situating our analysis within the specific socio-economic, political and ecological context in which degradation has taken place. This chapter uses the approach of political ecology, exploring local land users' perspectives and actions regarding land degradation by making note of the processes and contexts within which they are embedded and which affect the ways they use, access and manage their land (Blaikie 1985, Neumann 2005, Gray and Moseley 2005).

The rest of this chapter is organized as follows. In the second section, local people's perception of land degradation is presented. The third section examines how local land users view particular aspects of land degradation, including soil erosion. This is followed by the examination of local perspectives on the dynamics of soil fertility change in the fourth section. In the fifth section, local soil fertility management practices are examined. The final section draws a short conclusion.

6.2 Local people's perception of land degradation

How is land degradation viewed, and, in turn, managed by rural land users in Ethiopia? This section explores this question by looking at farmers' perceptions of land degradation, particularly their understanding and interpretation of the problem and how they are dealing with it.

Land degradation commonly manifests in various ways, including substantial soil erosion, soil fertility decline, loss of vegetation cover, and desertification (Andersson et al. 2011). As already discussed in chapter 3, the causes of land degradation include not only biophysical factors, but also socioeconomic and political factors (e.g., land-use change, resource demands, population pressure, and land tenure). These causes range from poor soil qualities to population pressure to insecure land tenure and climate change. It is widely argued that the processes of climate change interact with ongoing pressures on ecosystems and biodiversity in generating or accelerating land degradation (UNDP 2007, IFAD 2010). For instance, changes in the spatial and temporal patterns in rainfall and temperature can lead to or exacerbate land degradation. While land degradation is generally thought to be widespread, there is considerable variation between the two study areas, implying a spatial dimension. As introduced in the first chapter, the two study areas differ considerably in terms of their physiographic and ecological features. The Tach Gayint *woreda* has a topography of rugged terrain; by contrast, the Fogera *woreda* is relatively more plain (referred to as Fogera Plain).

Along with crop failure and small landholding size, land degradation was perceived as one of the main challenges to household livelihoods. When asked what major challenges they face in terms of securing their livelihoods, 90% of the sampled households in the Tach Gayint *woreda* replied that it was land degradation. In contrast, the figure for Fogera was only 29% (Table 6.1).

Table 6.1
Main challenges to household livelihoods

Perceptions of main livelihood problems	Study Area			
	Tach Gayint	(%)	Fogera	(%)
Crop/harvest failure	279	(93.0)	97	(48.5)
Insufficient size of farmland	269	(89.7)	187	(93.5)
Landlessness/no farmland at all	94	(31.3)	94	(47.0)
Lack of water	186	(62.0)	147	(73.5)
Lack of farm implements	103	(34.3)	57	(28.5)
Labour shortages	123	(41.0)	92	(46.0)
Land degradation	269	(89.7)	57	(28.5)
Farmland fragmentation	212	(70.7)	66	(33.0)
Land tenure insecurity	34	(11.3)	24	(12.0)
Lack of local employment opportunities	265	(88.3)	125	(62.5)

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

The other most commonly identified livelihood problems in Tach Gayint were crop failure (93%), inadequate farmland size (90%) and lack of local employment opportunities (88%). One elderly farmer explained how the situation appears to have changed:

> This land used to give more yield. It was relatively wide too. It gave well. Today, however, this land - beyond its small size - is not even blessed. Our land is full of both highland and lowlands. It is full of mountain chains that make it unable to hold the rain and keep the water even for a little while. As a result, the flood from the rain washes away the soil, even uprooting trees, which has left the land without fertile soils or vegetation (Interview, 23 Sept. 2012, Enjit *kebele*).

Similarly, another elderly informant explained that:

> In the past, from what we witnessed and from what we heard from our parents, there were not so many people as today. This same land was more than enough. It was also more fertile and productive. It was also relatively covered with trees that used to hold its soil, protecting it from erosion. If you see our land, nature was not generous towards us. We are disadvantaged in the land topography itself (Interview, Agatt *kebele,* 22 Dec. 2012).

These accounts give emphasis to topography, erratic rainfall, population growth and land distribution patterns when explaining erosion. Ethiopia is one of the countries at extreme risk from the effects of climate change (Maplecroft 2015). Continued climate change is increasing the scale and incidence of extreme weather events such as droughts and floods which further drive degradation of the country's land resources (UNDP 2007, 2015). As shown in Table 6.1, other challenges identified in Tach Gayint include farmland fragmentation (71%), shortage of water (62%), shortage of labour (41%), and lack of farm inputs (34%). While tenure insecurity has been widely accepted to exist among rural land users, and hence blamed for land degradation, the survey result did not indicate it to be a major constraint: only 11% and 12% of the households in Tach Gayint and Fogera, respectively, indicated it as a problem. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the sampled households' response when asked about their perception of tenure security reveals that most of them (in each of the study areas) feel secure (perceived tenure security)[1]. Although informants and focus group participants raised concerns about some of the issues that continue to threaten their tenure security, it seems that these issues do not deter them from planting trees and making other investments in their lands as coping strategies for land degradation (Table 6.2).

Table 6.2
Household land investment practices

Type of investments made on land	Study Area			
	Tach Gayint (%)		Fogera (%)	
Perceives benefits from investments in land will accrue to own household	286	(97.6)	170	(85.0)
Type of investments				
Built stone terraces	276	(96.5)	2	(1.2)
Built soil mound	98	(34.3)	102	(60.0)
Constructed check dam	157	(54.9)	78	(45.9)
Built drainage ditch	78	(27.3)	35	(20.6)
Constructed irrigation canal	8	(2.8)	65	(38.2)
Planted trees	58	(20.3)	51	(30.0)
Planted grass strips	10	(3.5)	5	(2.9)
Constructed flood percolation trench	71	(24.8)	0	(0.0)

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

At least in the context of the study area, the findings challenge the widespread notion that farmers in rural Ethiopia do not feel secure about their land rights, and hence do not feel that land-related investments are profitable and would accrue to them (Alemu 1999, Rahmato 2009, Admassie 2000, Deininger and Jin 2006, Bewket 2007). Survey findings regarding perceptions of profitability regarding land investment reveal that 98% of the households interviewed in Tach Gayint and 85% in Fogera perceive that land-related investments are profitable and feel such benefits will accrue to their own household (Table 6.2). A 45-year-old informant from the Enjit *kebele* in Tach Gayint explained the situation as follows:

> Despite the challenges that exist, I do not believe that there is anyone in our village who does not take care of his land out of fear that the land might be taken away for different reasons. It is not difficult to witness that all the people of this community are being involved in various land and environmental management activities. We are working hard in building terraces, applying compost, and building trenches. We are even working hard to transform places that were barren and stony grounds into wetlands by making them increase their underground water discharge. That's why we say our immediate problem is not the issue of tenure (in)security; rather, our pressing problem is that the land is not giving us back, threatening our livelihoods (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 22 Sept. 2012).

Another informant further explained:

> The most serious problem is that we are not producing enough because our land is full of harmful insects and pests; the rain falls early or stops early, so that our crops die as soon as the seeds start growing. Moreover, floods often wash our crops away. As you can see, we don't have that much plain land. When it rains in the mountains and hilltops, it immediately turns to flood that washes away all our hard work. We have been trying to resist this flood through terracing and other ways. However, we couldn't control it. It's still taking away our food. This is the challenge that we have been talking about. How can we protect the problem that pests and insects are causing us? How can we shelter and protect our land from the bad rains that fall earlier than the regular period? (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 7 Oct. 2012)

As the above accounts illustrated, farmers often underscore the type of priorities, constraints, and problems they experience that are central to their livelihoods. Land degradation in particular is perceived as a pressing

challenge in addition to insufficient farmlands. Understanding the importance given to the problem of land degradation provides better insights to understanding the local dynamics under which farmers struggle to meet their livelihood needs. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the fact that farmers widely engage in various land conservation activities may explain more than just the fact that land degradation is a major challenge they are faced with. It is plausible that the active involvement of farmers in various land and environmental management activities has also to do with the conditional nature of land rights; their use rights depend, among others, on 'proper' land and environmental conservation practices. Landholders who do not undertake land conservation activities are subject to penalties, including the loss of their right to the land. It could be argued that farmers are increasingly engaging in land management practices not only to reverse perceived problems of land degradation, but also to strengthen their land rights, as a form of inverse causality.[2] This dimension is reflected in this farmer's statement:

> According to the land law, if a farmer does not take care of his farmland and doesn't build terraces and plant trees around the farm, his land could be confiscated. Although no one has lost land because of this in our community, this law has been used as a key strategy for mobilizing the community towards land management (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 22 Sept. 2012).

From the perspective of political ecology, farmers' decisions to invest in their farmlands appear to be shaped not only by the degradation of the land upon which their livelihood is based, but also by the institutional dynamics and power structures that determine their rights to land. As the interpretation of "proper" land management practices rests with the local authorities, it is likely that the land law will not be read objectively, which could be an important political strategy for denying farmers their rights to land for various reasons (see Rahmato 2009).

As shown in Table 6.3, most households identified the main causes for their perceived livelihood problems discussed above to be population growth, depletion of assets, drought, floods, insects and pests, increasing environmental degradation and lack of irrigation.

Table 6.3
Causes of livelihood insecurity in the study areas

Perceived causes for livelihood insecurity	Study Area			
	Tach Gayint (%)		Fogera (%)	
Population growth	296	(98.7)	196	(98.0)
Lack of land tenure security	44	(14.7)	26	(13.0)
Depletion of resources/assets	297	(99.0)	127	(63.5)
Lack of irrigation systems	255	(85.0)	132	(66.0)
Drought	297	(99.0)	71	(35.5)
Floods	281	(93.7)	93	(46.5)
Insects and pests	297	(99.0)	145	(72.5)
Increasing environmental degradation	283	(94.3)	65	(32.5)
Inadequate infrastructure and social services	105	(35.0)	114	(57.0)
Local disputes/conflict over resources	104	(34.7)	160	(80.0)
Epidemics	87	(29.0)	75	(37.5)

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

6.2.1 Perceptions of soil erosion and fertility change

This section focuses on farmers' perspectives on aspects of land degradation, particularly soil erosion, soil fertility change, and agricultural productivity. Most of the sampled households in Tach Gayint (89%) indicated the existence of soil erosion problems on their farmland; this was the case for only 27% of the households in Fogera (Table 6.6). This difference between the two study areas can be explained by variations in their topography: while Tach Gayint is full of sloped land, the study sites in Fogera are overwhelmingly flat. One farmer in Tach Gayint explained: "Look up there, our land is full of rugged terrain. Erosion gullies are everywhere. Every time it rains, the soil is being washed away. Due to this, the landscape remained naked" (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 7 Oct. 2012). Although farmers attributed soil erosion to nature (particularly topography), they also pointed to the fact that the landscape is largely barren, which is thought to have increased the threat of erosion during the rainy season. Many farmers argued that the lack of vegetation cover has increased the problem of erosion.

A discourse that "our land was not like this before, it was not naked nor was there a lot of erosion gullies" was commonly heard during FGDs held with elderly farmers in Tach Gayint. Although this might shed some light on what the environment was generally like in the past, contemporary

landscapes "may also be interpreted incorrectly through an inappropriate reading of landscape history" (Scoones 1997: 164). This may be the case because assumptions and interpretations about the past may depend on 'misreading' the landscape that is visible today (Fairhead and Leach 1996). Leach and Mearns (1996) also asserted that narratives that take for granted that the landscape was better before pose challenges to the ways in which land degradation is understood, analyzed and acted upon, especially in terms of environmental policy making. The way elderly farmers in the present study area viewed their surrounding environment as "a landscape of loss" sharply resonates with the conclusion once made by Crummey and Winter-Nelson (2003: 120) among northern Ethiopian farmers: "a landscape of loss is how most of our elderly informants view it; not a landscape stripped of vitality, nor denuded of value or meaning, but one, nonetheless, impoverished from the one they knew as younger people." In this respect, the survey result appears to depict a mixed image regarding households' perception of changes in environmental conditions of their areas over the last 10 years. For example, while the results for Tach Gayint (Table 6.4) indicate a generally high perception amongst households (74%) that the soil condition of their lands has worsened in the last 10 years, a considerable proportion of households have perceived improvements in water and forest resources (42% and 34%, respectively). At the same time, 40% and 49% of the households, respectively, believed there to be worsening conditions of water and forest resources. This is indicative of the intricacy inherent in the interpretation of landscape change. Views and interpretations diverge among rural people even in the case of short-term environmental histories, covering periods within their living memories.

The farmers were aware of the effects of erosion in their individual farmlands and the landscape around them. In the household survey, farmers identified declines in crop yield, increases in the level of stoniness, the development of erosion gullies and loss of tree cover as common indicators of soil erosion (Table 6.5). In addition, a considerable number of households in Tach Gayint (35%) reported a decrease in their landholding size because of erosion (Chapter 4).

Table 6.4
Households' perception of changes in environmental conditions in the last 10 years in the Tach Gayint woreda

Environmental conditions	Percentage				
	Improved a lot	Improved	Remained the same	Worsened	Worsened a lot
Soil resources	0.3	6.0	4.3	74.3	15.0
Water resources	3.0	42.3	10.3	40.0	4.3
Forest resources (e.g., vegetation)	1.7	33.7	11.3	49.3	4.0
Overall environmental conditions	0.3	19.3	6.7	47.3	26.3

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

Table 6.5
Perception of the indicators of soil erosion

Perception of soil erosion indicators	Study Area			
	Tach Gayint (%)		Fogera (%)	
Increase in the level of stoniness	183	(70.9)	6	(11.1)
Development of erosion gullies	125	(48.4)	44	(81.5)
Decline in crop yield	218	(84.5)	28	(51.9)
Exposure of plant roots	41	(15.9)	1	(1.9)
Loss of vegetative cover	63	(24.4)	2	(3.7)

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

Aware of its effects, farmers in the sample have taken many measures to control erosion on their lands, including cultivating along the contour, terracing, building bunds and check dams, planting trees, and digging drainage ditches alongside their lands to direct floods away from them. As Table 6.6 shows, most farmers (particularly in the Tach Gayint *woreda*) are undertaking measures to control soil erosion. In this respect, 97% and 52% of the households in Tach Gayint and Fogera, respectively, practiced some kind of soil erosion control measures (Table 6.6). Notwithstanding the difference in the extent of soil erosion between the two study areas, the fact that the overwhelming majority of the farmers in Tach Gayint have been undertaking some kind of erosion control measures could be partly due to the influence of ongoing Productive Safety Net Program

(PSNP). PSNP is a cash and food-for-work programme that aims to provide support to food insecure households in ways that improve their access to services and natural resources and rehabilitate and enhance their natural environment, mainly by requiring the able-bodied adults to participate in public works. This has meant that a significant number of beneficiaries participated in activities aimed at reclaiming degraded lands. It also appears plausible that farmers in Tach Gayint generally have poor quality land, which forces them to undertake more anti-erosion measures – since there are very limited options for abandoning a land that has erosion problems. Due to these reasons, farmers in Tach Gayint are making more investments to combat erosion than farmers in Fogera.

Table 6.6
Household perception of soil erosion

Perception of soil erosion	Study Area			
	Tach Gayint		Fogera	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Household perceives the existence of soil erosion on farmland	260	(88.7)	54	(27.3)
Household undertakes soil erosion measures	285	(97.3)	102	(51.5)
Types of soil erosion control measures being practiced				
Cultivation along the contour	245	(86.0)	31	(30.4)
Terracing	266	(93.3)	26	(25.5)
Strip-cropping along the contour	17	(6.0)	2	(2.0)
Soil or stone bunding	131	(46.0)	45	(44.1)
Windbreaks	4	(1.4)	-	-
Tree planting	51	(17.9)	20	(19.6)
Check dams	155	(54.4)	68	(66.7)
Drainage ditch	89	(31.2)	7	(6.9)

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

It is of further interest to note that, throughout the Amhara region (as is the case for the whole country), massive soil and water conservation and forestry activities have been promoted and are ongoing in an effort to combat the present state of environmental degradation. A great deal of community mobilization is being made towards watershed conservation on the premise that the present state of environmental degradation and

the resultant food insecurity problems that are pervasive in rural areas can be countered through various large-scale soil and water conservation activities, including the construction of bunds, terraces, drainage ditches and check dams, and community forests. Although such activities have been underway throughout rural areas, in Tach Gayint and other *woredas* that are food insecure, a great deal of effort and resources are being channeled in soil and water conservation through the PSNP. PSNP beneficiaries are expected to provide five days of labour per month for six months to the public work schemes. According to information obtained from the *woreda* agricultural office and field observations, the scale of conservation structures constructed through the public work schemes is remarkable. However, participation in the public work schemes would not have been the same without the PSNP. Farmers indicated, during group discussions and individual interviews, that free labor does not have wide acceptance since almost all of the people involved in the program are poor. Interestingly, the existence of the PSNP itself appears to have discouraged non-beneficiaries of the programme from participating in the community environmental conservation activities. This is despite current government directives, which stipulate that every farmer is expected to contribute free labor to public work schemes in their respective communities. Particularly, people who are not in the PSNP commented that it is a great disadvantage not to be included into the programme in terms of access to various trainings, credit, and opportunities to participate in the resettlement program as most of the farmers needed these desperately. One informant, a 42-year-old farmer in the Enjit *kebele* from Tach Gayint explained as follows:

> So far, people who are included in the Safety-Net Program have been the only beneficiaries of the Food Security Program. In other words, benefits including training, credit, resettlement and other opportunities have been provided only to those people whom the Safety-Net Program included. I can say that the way this program has been implemented is like divide-and-rule, as it has divided one people, one community living in one *kebele* into two groups- one beneficiary and the other non-beneficiary. This is like administering the people by creating a systematically divided group. This has become a huge obstacle to community mobilization. There is one group of people benefiting more for the only reason that it is included in the Safety-Net Program. This group gets loan. It participates in the government's resettlement program. The other group is the one that is not benefiting anything from the various opportunities of the program for the reason that it is not embraced in the Safety-Net Program. Therefore, there are two groups

> of people within just one poor community living in one and the same *kebele*. In the beginning, it was thought that this Safety-Net Program included individuals who were considered to be the poorest of the poor. However, all the people in this *kebele,* especially nowadays, are one and the same economically- all poor. That is why I say this program has a fundamental fault of not considering this reality. For instance, if we, in the future, get the chance to participate in the resettlement program, this situation will be a great obstacle to us (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 14 Oct. 2012).

Sentiments similar to the one reflected in the above account were widely held among people who were not included into the program. The implication is that the selection of participants to the PSNP is contested. Designed as an important part of the government's food security strategy, beneficiaries of the PSNP are eligible for a variety of support services, delivered through a packaged approach geared towards helping them become food secure. According to the Tach Gayint *woreda* PSNP desk officer, the program participants are selected according to the programme's guidelines. These require the formation of a task force consisting of members from local government offices and the communities. This task force would then draw up a list of the most food insecure households in each *kebele*. However, informants indicated the lack of transparency and consistency in the selection of the participants. Reflecting on the practice, Rahmato (2009: 203) pointed out that "local officials are responsible for selecting beneficiary households, preparing the employment and package schemes, managing the program and distributing resources. This has been a windfall to local authorities because it gives them considerable power and influence over peasant farmers." A relatively similar assertion was made by Lavers (2013: 461) that the PSNP serves the political objective of "ensuring state control over the rural population".

Equally serious, while the remarkable effect of the PSNP on the scale of conservation activities is noticeable, there is also the need to take a closer look at farmers' perspectives on the ongoing public conservation activities, in order to understand how much these activities arise from their own experiences. A key impression emerged during group discussions and individual interviews: many farmers in Tach Gayint appeared more concerned with their livelihoods (including farmland shortage and crop productivity) than the benefits of environmental conservation efforts in the long run. The same Tach Gayint informant quoted above stated as follows:

> There is a huge programme of the government, which has been implemented to turn some barren lands devoid of trees to a green and forested area. I say that a farmer could have cultivated at least one *Akimada* (one *Akimada* is approximately 30 kg) of crop from the land that was secured for afforestation purposes. I understand that our land is exhausted, as it has continuously been eroded by flood and its soil blown away by wind. It is my worry that many people will pass away before we will be able to develop our area and turn it into green. It is just that many people are suffering of hunger and many others are fleeing to other areas. Otherwise, we are by now well aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the government's programme of rehabilitating our hillsides and slope lands (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 14 Oct. 2012).

The above account points out a fundamental aspect of the farmers' views on the ongoing conservation efforts (particularly on community lands): the farmers seem more concerned with overcoming the problems of access to land and short-term productivity than envisioning the benefits of land conservation in the long run. In the absence of alternative livelihood opportunities, the fact that conservation efforts may claim land from already land-scarce households means that the farmers tend to hold a short-term perspective. Considering the general shortage of land and increasing difficulty in gaining access to land, it is quite understandable that farmers perceived ongoing large-scale conservation efforts that involve the construction of structures and enclosures as competition for the very limited land available. Although the overwhelming majority of farmers from Tach Gayint perceive land degradation as a major problem, they have a different perspective in terms of what they see as a priority – overcoming the problems of access to land and increasing crop yields from their diminishing landholdings. Since most farmers are faced with a "simple reproduction squeeze" (Bernstein 1979: 427), they may tend to look for short-term benefits from the land that would have developed under conservation projects.

6.2.2 Farmers' perspectives on the dynamics of soil fertility change

Soil fertility refers to the availability of essential nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and organic matter in the soil (Dejene et al. 1997). Soil fertility decline is a gradual process in which essential soil nutrients

are lost as a result of the interplay of different processes – including erosion and continuous cultivation – at a rate faster than they are replenished through organic and inorganic inputs (Andersson et al. 2011: 300). It has been widely argued that most soils in sub-Saharan Africa are poor, degraded soils; moreover, the low or declining soil fertility status has been considered a major constraint to agricultural productivity across the continent (Sanchez 2002, Koning and Smaling 2005, IFAD 2010: 154). As a result, issues concerning soil fertility depletion have received much attention in the development agendas at national and regional levels over the last two decades (Andersson et al. 2011). Many scholars have questioned the underlying assumptions, methods and scales supporting assertions that soil fertility is declining in Africa (Scoones 1997, Fairhead and Scoones 2005). Although "soil fertility is clearly a problem in some places for some people" (Scoones 1997: 161), existing broad assertions of soil fertility tend to obscure local dynamics and variations in soil fertility change. In this respect, farmers' own understandings and assessment of soil fertility change at the local level deserves attention.

In our study, a decline in soil fertility was a commonly cited problem in both the case study areas. This was further reiterated by the household survey in which 95% (Tach Gayint) and 73% (Fogera) of the households perceived a decline in the fertility of soils on their cultivated lands over the past five years (Table 6.7). According to farmers' own perspective, the most evident manifestation of soil fertility depletion is a decline in crop yield. When asked whether they had perceived changes in productivity over time, nearly 95% of the respondents in the household survey in each of the study areas replied that they have indeed observed changes in the level of crop yields. When asked what trends they had observed over the last five years, 96% and 79% of the households in Tach Gayint and Fogera, respectively, reported a failing crop productivity; 4% and 21% said they had observed better yields. Accordingly, most of the farmers asserted that a declining trend in crop yield is an important indicator of soil fertility change. The informant from the Agatt *kebele* inTach Gayint stated:

> Our land is no longer fertile and productive. It doesn't give good harvests. This is because we have practiced continuous farming on the same land for years and years. Now, this land hates us. Even if we cultivate it, we do this and that, it hates us. It refuses to give back (Interview, Agatt *kebele*, 20 Dec. 2012).

One elderly farmer, who was also a priest in one of the churches in the Enjit *kebele* (Tach Gayint), described the changes:

> Today, the land has left the community in a lot of difficulties. The problem is that, no matter how hard one works, the yield is not enough even for a household of only two people (a husband and a wife). Its soil is infertile. In the past, in those good days, by working hard, one farmer used to share his fortune with the less fortunate. But now, never mind sharing with others, he does not produce enough to sustain his family. It was this farmer who worshiped and provided praises to this village church. This church has been administered through the contribution of each farmer in the village. However, today, most farmers have got into troubles to the extent of finding nothing to contribute and thus the church service has been continuously decreasing. I say this from what I experienced and saw while serving the church for many years. I know what the community used to bring when coming to the church. When doing '*zikkir*' [commemoration of a saint], our community likes to present food and drinks in abundance. It used to be copious. It used to brew '*tella*'[local alcoholic drink] using '*gan*'[a large pottery used in making drinks]. Then it turned to using '*gembo*'[very small clay pot compared to '*gan*'] to brew the drink (*tella*). What is worse is that our community presently is being forced to use plastic containers (relatively even smaller in size) to brew the same drink. All this is happening because of the hardship we are in. The land is exhausted….it doesn't produce (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 22 Oct. 2012).

Many farmers also emphasized that weed infestation has become more common, signifying a decline in soil fertility. This in turn contributed to a decline in crop yield. Farmer accounts suggest the low level of fertility of the soils they cultivate and how it is difficult to produce enough to feed their families, have become major issues that preoccupy them when they look to the future. Nonetheless, this challenge faced should be seen in the context of the general precariousness of the farmers' livelihoods as discussed in the preceding chapters, rather than relating it to an inability to produce sufficient food due to declining soil fertility. As a 42-year-old informant from Tach Gayint succinctly put it: "whether the land gives or not, we have no other options. Whatever it is, we still cultivate it because it's our source of livelihood" (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, Dec. 2012). In the context of Ethiopia, in addition to the low fertility of soils, "small plot sizes mean that livelihoods must be sustained through means that go beyond the intensification of agricultural production" (Scoones 2001:38).

Table 6.7
Farmers' perception of soil fertility change

Perceptions of soil fertility change	Study Area			
	Tach Gayint		Fogera	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Household perceives soil fertility decline on farmland	277	(94.5)	145	(73.2)
Household perceives changes in the level of crop yield	278	(94.9)	187	(94.4)
Trends in crop yield change over the last five years				
Increased	10	(3.6)	39	(20.9)
Declined	268	(96.4)	148	(79.1)
Household undertakes measures to replenish soil fertility	283	(96.6)	181	(91.4)
Soil fertility management measures being practiced				
Use of chemical fertilizers	155	(54.8)	117	(64.6)
Use of manure	220	(77.7)	81	(44.8)
Intercropping	17	(6.0)	44	(24.3)
Compost	250	(88.3)	111	(61.3)
Agroforestry	30	(10.6)	1	(0.6)
Fallowing (field rotation)	3	(1.1)	18	(9.9)
Crop rotation	210	(74.2)	49	(27.1)

Source: Author's own survey, 2012.

6.3 Local soil fertility management practices

Aware of the effects of declining soil fertility on crop yields, the overwhelming majority of respondents in the household survey indicated that they had used some methods to replenish soil fertility. Accordingly, an overwhelming majority – 97% and 91% of the surveyed households in Tach Gayint and Fogera, respectively – reported undertaking measures to replenish the fertility of soils on their fields (Table 6.7). These ranged from the application of inputs to crop rotation techniques. For example, as shown in Table 6.7, more than half of the households surveyed in each of the study areas used fertilizer to enhance soil fertility in their fields. Despite the survey indication that more than half of the households have used chemical fertilizer, all individual informants and group discussion participants in Tach Gayint emphasized problems in their respective communities regarding the availability and use of chemical fertilizers. One informant, the 55-year-old farmer from Tach Gayint, indicated financial difficulties in gaining access to chemical fertilizer. He explained as follows:

> We were relieved a bit about the productivity when we started applying chemical fertilizers on our farmlands. Today, however, using fertilizer has become another headache (*chana*) to us. The price of this fertilizer has become untouchably expensive. As most of us are very poor, there is nothing we can do and there is nowhere we can go to find that amount of money for the fertilizer. Its price is too much to us. Otherwise, it could have helped us to see some flashing positive changes in the harvest. Even if the peasant is well aware of the advantage of using the fertilizer, he is left with no choice on his hand but to leave the fertilizer aside. Presently, many farmers are in a difficult situation as they are being asked to pay three years residue debt of fertilizers. Being in this situation, how could a farmer dare to use it? The loan has him tightly handcuffed (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 8 Oct. 2012).

Another informant added that working the land has become so difficult that even the use of chemical fertilizer does not help enhancing yields. He also stressed that farmers have generally felt powerless in finding solutions to this problem, forcing them to look to the government for solutions:

> We were told to use fertilizers. Accordingly, we tried to use it getting it with a loan. Now, most of us are indebted nearly 1,000 birr, which we are going to pay back. From what I observed, I do not think the land could even be productive enough to feed the family, never mind paying back the debt. It is not only that we do not have any other means to buy the fertilizers, but also that, even after using it, the productivity still has not improved that much (Interview, Enjit *kebele*, 8 Oct. 2012).

What emerges from the above is that the ability to use fertilizers to increase yields appears to be constrained by lack of money, reflecting the generally poor socio-economic conditions and resources available. Many farmers have incurred debts that they have not been able to repay and can no longer apply chemical fertilizers to sustain their soils. In addition, farmers explained that the fertilizers' less than impressive impact could have resulted from not knowing on what type of soils to apply the fertilizer. The informants argued that, despite the fact that fertilizers improve soil fertility, this did not lead to increases in yields, because some farmers used it inappropriately. One informant in his mid-fiftiess, from the Agatt *kebele* in Tach Gayint, mentioned that – desperate to enhance yields from their already exhausted lands – farmers apply fertilizers irrespective of the slope and soil types of their fields:

> Applying fertilizer has been effective only on limited farmlands. I believe that conditions such as whether the land is eroded or not, whether it is plain or sloppy, and the type of the soil should be taken into account instead of simply being eager for its benefits and rushing to use it. Here in my *kebele*, I know many farmers who simply apply fertilizers for enhancing productivity without taking into account these issues, including the nature and characteristics of their land and its soil, and this has been putting them into great loss. For example, when we use fertilizer on this 'walka soil' (black soil), we get better results whereas applying it on other lands like sloppy fields where its soil is greatly washed away, the crop grows in June but soon dries and dies away quickly as September comes in. As a result, not only will the crop not give any yields, its residue (hay) becomes so poor that it can barely be collected for animals. For instance, if we take '*teff*' crop in which fertilizer is applied on the farmland, when we try to mow it with a sickle to collect its harvests, the stalk is so weak that it gets easily broken. As the stalk breaks every time we hold it even before using the sickle, collecting the yield becomes a tough task that leaves most of the produce scattered on the field (Interview, Agatt *kebele*, 20 Dec. 2012).

This underscores the need to look beyond the application of inorganic fertilizers as a means of restoring the productivity of eroded soils. It has previously been noted that "the efficiency of inorganic fertilizer in an eroded soil where the physical properties are degraded alongside chemical nutrients depletion depends, to a large extent, on the dynamic relationship between the level of harm done to the soil's physical condition and the level of progress made in the difficult task of improving it which needs a combination of carefully selected, suitable management practices" (Obalum et al. 2012: 5). The erratic nature of the rainfall patterns has also often been seen by farmers to impact the effectiveness of fertilizers, as lack of rain was seen to mean that the fertilizer would 'burn' the crops quickly. As a consequence, many farmers have incurred debts, as they could not get more out of the land, jeopardizing their ability to repay their debts. Their indebtedness appears to have far-reaching consequences on their livelihoods, including threats to their land rights. For many farmers, this has meant that, coupled with diminishing plot sizes, they struggle to continuously cultivate without adequate fertilizer input, which is a factor partially accounted for low productivity. Failure to repay debts also threatens their land rights, as local authorities may keep the debtors from using their farmlands. In this case, the debtor's land may be rented out by authorities to someone else who can cultivate it until all the debts of the

original landholder are repaid from the rent. From among informants, for instance, the elderly farmer who was also a priest from the Enjit *kebele* in Tach Gayint indicated that he had lost his land because of the debts he had incurred. The informant argued that it had been a year since he had paid his debts completely, but that he had been told of six more months of unpaid credit. As a result, he had been forbidden from using his land – which made him 'at a loss for words, because it is my livelihood' – leaving him to resort to day-labor in order to survive.

Since declines in soil fertility vary from place to place (Elias and Scoones 1999) – as do the strategies used to cope with them – unlike the farmers in Tach Gayint, most of the farmers in Fogera believe that they have land of better quality, suggesting a spatially disaggregated view on soil fertility status between the two study areas. As indicated in Table 6.7, despite the fact that more survey respondents in Fogera used chemical fertilizers than those in Tach Gayint, it was pointed out during the qualitative study that the use of fertilizer is an emerging trend. More farmers claimed not to have used chemical fertilizers because their land did not need it. For example, a farmer from the Shina *kebele* in Fogera explained that:

> Only a few farmers have been using fertilizer starting from two or three years ago. Most farmers don't use any kind of chemical fertilizers on their fields. Because farmlands in our village are still in a good condition. Even for those farmers who have been using it, they do so just to try it. Otherwise, so far the land is fertile naturally. As this area is low lying, everything from elsewhere gets washed and brought to this area, that maintains the fertility of its soils (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 11 Dec. 2012).

Some of the informants in Fogera indicated that they did not opt to use chemical fertilizers on their fields because if they were to apply it, the land would get used to it and would need more of it year after year. Instead, the farmers reported that they opt to use organic fertilizers like manure and compost, which are better than chemical fertilizers in terms of cost and sustainability. However, despite the preference for organic fertilizers, farmers (particularly from Tach Gayint) often comment on the declining availability of manure, as many of them do not generally own or have only very few livestock to produce it. Although they emphasized its importance, some farmers viewed the preparation of compost as demanding, particularly in terms of the space required, as this competes for the small arable land left at their disposal.

Another important soil management practice in the study area, as elsewhere in the region, is that farmers traditionally relied on the sequence of crops and rotation that involves planting crops sequentially depending on differing soil types and fertility status. However, as shown in Table 6.7, fewer survey respondents in Fogera practiced crop rotation than in Tach Gayint. Since the expansion of rice cultivation, this practice is on the decline in Fogera; this is because most farmers cultivate rice every year, while also planting short season crops after the rice is harvested. The observed spatial variation in soil management practices, in this case crop rotation, implies that farmers do not always practice it uniformly. Instead, they give preference to some crops over others, with the choice of crops being shaped by the farmers' understanding of spatial variations in soil fertility and other soil properties. In other words, spatial variation in soil quality is taken into account in the farmers' choices of soil fertility management practices to be applied by crop type.

The survey also suggested that agroforestry is not widely used as a means of maintaining soil fertility in the study areas, although 11% of survey respondents in Tach Gayint claimed to have used it. Interviews and field observations revealed that farmers tend to plant trees mainly around their homesteads, eucalyptus being the commonly planted tree. The main reason for planting eucalyptus was not to control soil erosion; instead, they are planted principally for their economic value. A 52-year-old informant from the Shina *kebele* in Fogera explained:

> In fact there has never been a natural forest in our *kebele,* even in the past. Despite the absence of natural forests, eucalyptus trees planted and owned by individuals have increased profoundly over time. One can make a lot of money from the sale of these trees for construction purposes. Here also, it is used for fuel and to construct our houses (Interview, Shina *kebele*, 11 Dec. 2012).

Unsurprisingly, fallowing fields as a mechanism for soil regeneration is almost not practiced anymore, although most farmers interviewed believe that their land actually needs to rest. Given the shortage of land, it appears that farmlands are now cultivated continuously without leaving them fallow. Nonetheless, 10% of the survey respondents from Fogera still reported to have fallowed some of their fields. As discussed in the previous chapters, this seems to indicate that households in Fogera held relatively larger holdings than households in Tach Gayint, where most even complained about the poor quality of their already small-sized fields. In spite

of the fact that landholdings are generally too small to leave idle even for a year, under the current land law of the Amhara region, the landholders' usufruct rights to their land are contingent upon continuous cultivation. If landholders leave their farms fallow for three or more consecutive years, they risk losing their right to the land, which would then be allocated to someone else. This hinders their inclination to leave their fields fallow.

It is of further interest to note that the absence of the fallowing practice has not corresponded with a widespread use of fertilizers in the study area, although farmers do use low-input techniques, such as composting, manure, and crop rotation to sustain their soil fertility. In fact, chemical fertilizer use in Ethiopia is generally far lower than in other developing countries. In 2010, for example, the consumption of chemical fertilizer in the country was 22.8 kg per hectare of arable land, while this was as high as 174.5 kg per hectare for South Asia (World Bank 2014c).

6.4 Conclusions

This chapter highlights the importance of understanding farmers' own perceptions and interpretations of land degradation, particularly how it is viewed and managed. As discussed in this chapter, land degradation, along with the limited size of holdings, was perceived as one of the major challenges faced by households – mainly by those in the Tach Gayint *woreda*. Declining soil fertility, widespread soil erosion and declining yields were perceived to reflect land degradation. Cognizant of the problem of both land shortage and land degradation, most households have been engaging in various land management activities, limited by the resources available to them. In examining the impact of tenure security perceptions on land degradation, it was revealed that tenure insecurity was not a major factor in the study areas. Although tenure insecurity has been widely accepted to exist among rural landholders, and although it is closely associated with the continued state ownership of the land, this study's findings indicate that most households feel secure about their land holdings. In other words, the study found little evidence that tenure insecurity perceptions influenced land degradation and management practices. This chapter, therefore, suggests that the focus on land tenure security may be misleading, at least in the areas studied. The findings also revealed some existing concerns that appear to threaten land users' tenure security (e.g., the conditional nature of land rights), which might have led to more investments in land management activities.

Farmers are responding to both land shortage and what they perceived as land degradation by engaging in various land management practices. This is mainly because they lack the option to abandon their degraded or no longer productive land, as land availability and alternative livelihood opportunities are increasingly limited in the study areas. The farmers try to develop their land regardless of their tenure (in)security to meet their subsistence. The growing concern among farmers is that their ability to sustain their land through intensification and land conservation efforts has been rather constrained by their limited access to economic and other resources. As Blaikie (1989: 35) argued "any outcome in soil and water conservation are crucially determined by the political economy of the agrarian society involved. The process of intensification of land use can be viewed as one determined by the pattern of access to resources. While intensification may result from altered access patterns, it also demands a set of resources…. The people involved simply do not have them. [Lack of access to resources] is one which locks them into a cycle of untreated land degradation".

Overall, it is important to understand why farmers engage in various land conservation strategies the way they do, particularly by looking at their socio-economic dimensions and ecological and political circumstances that frame their land use and conservation. An understanding of these issues, therefore, allows the focus of analysis to extend beyond that of tenure security to emphasize the role of other non-tenurial factors.

Notes

[1] For an analysis of the concept of 'perceived tenure security', see van Gelder 2010 (Chapter 3 of this thesis).

[2] Related to this, many studies on Africa have already demonstrated that rural landholders undertake land-related investments to enhance their tenure security when they perceive that their land rights are uncertain (Belsey 1995, Platteau 1996, Sjaastad and Bromley 1997, Gray 2003).

7 The politics and implication of large-scale land acquisitions for indigenous local communities in the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state[1]

7.1 Introduction

The politically contested nature of land, land access and land quality has become even more so in the era of current global land rush as will be demonstrated in this chapter. This chapter examines the implication and contemporary political-economic dynamics of the role of elites in large-scale land acquisitions in Ethiopia by exploring contests over land and authority, with a particular focus on the Benishangul-Gumuz region.[2]

A "big-push" for the acquisition of arable land has been under way in many African and other developing countries, particularly since the second half of the 2000s. In the case of Ethiopia, the recent and on-going large-scale land acquisitions (measuring millions of hectares) of agricultural land by domestic and foreign corporate investors in lowland areas of Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromiya and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNP) regions have raised widespread concerns (Rahmato 2011). These regions have become the main destinations for many investors in farmland. However, in the context of agrarian differentiation and unequal power relations, communities may not equally benefit or may even lose out from these farmland investments. This chapter argues that, as opposed to other developing countries, in which global factors have been the major drivers of land deals, the promotion of large-scale agricultural investment in Ethiopia is planned on a grand scale as central to the government's current development strategy. Given such an argument, the chapter explores current trends and contradictions of the land acquisition process in the country in order to understand the role of elites and the implications for local communities, with a particular focus

on the Benishangul-Gumuz region. It aims to shed light on how contests over land and authority are played out in federal and regional state contexts. The chapter particularly focuses on the contradictions and contestations in the relationship between the federal and regional state level authority over land and natural resources. This is done through a case study of three selected *woredas* of the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state.

Data presented in this chapter comes from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key informants, focus group discussions (FGDs), direct field observation and a secondary literature review (see Chapter 2).

The next section analyses the regional trend and the contradictions of land allocation process and examines the elite actors involved in the land acquisitions. Section three examines the implications of the land acquisitions for local communities and the environment. The conclusion considers the factors that might affect the government's continued support for large-scale land transfers as currently practised.

7.2 Land investment in the Benishangul-Gumuz region: trends and contradictions

As already noted, the Benishangul-Gumuz region typifies major acquisitions of land for commercial investments. The extent of such transfers has increased, particularly since 2005. According to the data we compiled, the amount of land transferred in the region to investors, both domestic and foreign, is estimated to be 340,590 hectares. The transfer has been undertaken both by the regional state and the federal government. Within the region, the responsibility for transferring land to investors was previously vested in the regional Investment Office. It now lies with the newly established Regional Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use (BoEPLAU). Until recently, the process was that prospective agricultural investors interested in the region applied directly to the Investment Office for a license. The Investment Bureau still grants licenses, but the authority for allocating land to investors is now vested in the BoEPLAU. Once they received an investment license, investors were then eligible to request land for agricultural investment through lease arrangements. Investors were required to submit written applications for investment lands to the Investment Office. Potential investors normally indicated in their applications the *woreda* in which they wished to invest, even

sometimes further specifying the *kebele*. Then the investment office directly inquired with the *woreda* to identify land appropriate for the investment purpose. The *woreda* administrative council then appointed an ad-hoc committee to identify the required land and facilitate the transfer process. As local authorities were the ones responsible for land allocations, the committee also included *kebele* representatives to identify the required land and thus undertake the demarcation of the boundaries of the land through traditional methods. Finally, the minutes of the committee regarding its activities was sent to the regional Investment Office and was then eventually presented to the Regional Investment Board, chaired by the president of the regional state, for final decision.[3] In that way, investors acquire rural investment lands through arrangements ranging from short-term contracts to long-term leases after signing the contract with the president.[4] This process had left many fault lines that have arguably created ineffectiveness and adverse consequences, as we shall see in the course of the discussion.

Data obtained from the Regional BoEPLAU indicate that more than 260 projects have acquired rural land through the Investment Office in the period 2005–2010, covering over 126,160 hectares (Moreda 2013). Almost all of these investors were domestic economic and political elites and they were allotted land by the regional state, measuring from 100 to 8,000 hectares, the majority being less than 500 hectares (Moreda 2013, Annex 2). The evidence we collected reveals the involvement of an array of individuals and business enterprises, including civil servants, the diaspora and local political elites. This trend complicates the popular assertion that foreign corporate investors are the primary actors who are engaged in the acquisition of land in the country.

There is also a rising trend in which the federal government (through the Ministry of Agriculture) has been engaged in the transfer of land to both domestic and foreign investors. Evidence obtained from various sources shows that as of January 2012, 16 investment projects had been granted land by the federal government, involving 214,431 hectares of land across the region, mainly in the Metekel Zone (Benishangul-Gumuz Region Investment Office 2012; MoA 2015 [collated by the author]).

Table 7.1
Number of land investment projects granted land by the regional government

Administrative zone	Woreda	Number of Investment Projects	Land Size (Hectare)
Metekel Zone	Guba	100	44,592
	Dangur	18	18,196
	Mandura	2	488
	Wenbera	1	500
	Bulen	1	116
	Pawe	8	1,648
Assosa Zone	Assosa	11	1,337
	Bambasi	36	11,883
	Odabuldi-Guli	24	3,765
	Menge	6	1,690
	Kurmuk	1	609
	Sherkole	13	8,695
	Homesha	3	1,481
	Mao-Komo	14	10,366
Kemashi Zone	Yaso	13	4660
	Belojiganfoy	14	15,458
	Kemashi	1	170
	Agelo Meti	2	505
Total		268	126,159

Source: BoEPLAU, May 2012 collated by the author.

Generally, an estimated 1.4 million hectares of land have been earmarked for commercial agricultural investment in the region that will be administered by the federal government.[5] Currently, there is a strong criticism over the way in which the federal government has identified the land that is made "available" in the federal land bank that has been transferred to potential investors. Experts and officials at different capacities interviewed unanimously indicated that the federal government identified the "investment lands" based on the spatial analysis of satellite images and aerial photographs, without verifying the data through community level socio-economic field research. The informants stressed that critical aspects, such as local land use practices and patterns, were not taken into account in the land allocations and thus created many problems for local

communities as well as for the environment (Interview with BoEPLAU senior official, Assosa, April 2012).

Table 7.2
Partial list of land transfers in the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state by the federal government

Investor/Company Name	Origin (Domestic/Foreign)	Investment location (Woreda)	Land Size (Hectares)
Kehedam Trading	Diaspora	Guba	3,000
ASKY Agri. Development	Domestic	Dangur	3,000
Tracon Trading Pvt. Ltd	Domestic	Dangur	5,000
Access Capital	Domestic	Dangur	5,000
S&P Energy Solutions	Foreign (Indian)	Dangur & Guba	50,000
Keystone	Diaspora	Pawe special	431
Biruhway Agro-Industry	Domestic	Dangur	5,000
Gashaw Bizu Commercial Farm	Diaspora	Dangur	3,000
Tigabu Agro-Industry	Domestic	Dangur	3,000
CLC Agro-Industry PLC	Foreign (Indian)	Dangur	25,000
Tikmet Agro-Industry	Diaspora	Dangur	3,000
Mamaye Mihert Nega	Diaspora	Dangur	3,000
Horizon Plantations	Foreign	Guba	20,000
Hashim Ismael Alkawaji	Foreign	Mao-Komo	3,000
Getfan Mechanized Farm	-	Dangur	3,000
Sun Biofuel (NBC)	Foreign (UK)	-	80,000
Total			214,431

Source: Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State Investment Office, Ministry of Agriculture, collated by the author.

Despite increasing land acquisitions across the region, classifications of land uses have not actually been done. The practices observed hitherto were based on the notion that the region has abundant "unoccupied land". Such notions can lead to "very rough, sometimes misleading, representation of actual existing rights to land" (Scott 1998b: 47). This study also shows that land allocations were largely not cognizant of the fact that indigenous people, particularly the Gumuz, are shifting cultivators, and communal lands that appear "unused" are indeed key sources of their live-

lihoods. Information gathered from local communities and selected informants from government offices indicates that genuine local consultations over classifications of land were not carried out and thus the trend of land allocation for investment in the region was simply based on the perspective of a few *kebele* leaders, *woreda* administrators, regional state officials and the federal government (the Ministry of Agriculture). A farmer in his early forties in Qotta *kebele* within Dangur *woreda,* who said that he has been an active participant in community affairs, remembers the way in which he first came to learn of the acquisition of land in his village:

> No one in our village was consulted or informed about the investment land acquisitions, which have now surrounded our village. For your surprise, I, myself by coincidence met employees of one of the investors in the field while they were clearing the land for constructing their camp when they first came. I found the situation strange and I didn't take time asking them: Who are you? Why are you clearing our land? Who gave you the permission? Promptly they told me that they were given by the *woreda* administration with the consent of *kebele* leaders and for that, they said, they have legal documents (Interview, Qotta *kebele*, May 2012).

As the above account demonstrates, transparent and broad local community consultations have not been part of the process, although the role of local- and district-level authorities as facilitators of the land transfer is observed. According to informants (from zonal government offices), such drawbacks emanated from the lack of clear guidelines for the allocation of land to agricultural investments, which take account of the regional context (Interview, Gilgel Beles town, April–June 2012). The promotion and administration of commercial agricultural investments in the region, mainly before 2010, were not consistently implemented according to land administration and use policies and regulations designed and based on the objective realities of the region. The regional government did not put forward sound criteria or preconditions for the selection of competent investors among applicants. Most of the local investors who have already acquired land in the region have neither the required capital nor the technology and relevant experience to engage in large-scale agricultural investments. The result, of course, is that the land is mostly kept idle or misused. In this regard, it would arguably appear that some investors acquired lands for speculative purposes, in contravention of the proclamation that land cannot be sold or exchanged by any other means of exchange.[6] Currently, for example, the land acquisitions have been used to

benefit from financial institutions, particularly from the Development Bank of Ethiopia, since investors who have leased rural lands are able to present their use rights as collateral (Interview, Assosa, April 2012).

An assessment by the regional government reports that of 65,540 hectares of land transferred in the Metekel Zone since 2005, 11,615 hectares are currently developed, which is less than 20 per cent.[7] In addition, the evidence also shows that four investors did not start operations after they acquired land within the Zone. What became evident through this study is that, in the same way as their peasant counterparts, some of the so called "investors" have been using animal traction for cultivation, arguably due to the lack of capital to purchase tractors and other farm machines. One informant (from government offices) put his sentiment regarding the situation as follows:

> Most of the time, when investors first come to apply for investment lands, they normally show up driving luxury cars as if they are rich and can afford to finance large commercial farms operated by modern farm inputs and technologies. But once they acquire land they either operate far below expectations or keep the land idle. Even some were shamefully found cultivating by oxen and donkeys. (Interview, Mankush town, June 2012)

Another senior expert interviewed in Assosa, the regional capital, confirmed the tendency of some investors to use animal traction for ploughing and pointed out that such practices have been widely evident in some *kebeles* of all the three administrative zones in the region. For example, the practice of some investors who have acquired land in Jaba *kebele* within Dangur *woreda,* as well as in some *kebeles* of Bambasi, Yaso, and Belojiganfoy *woredas*, could be mentioned as typical cases (Interview, Assosa, April 2012).

There are also cases where "investors"[8] who were allocated or had acquired land in one way or another engaged in renting out their land to third parties, although this is in fact strictly illegal. In the words of one key informant:

> We [the regional government] have now realised that some investors rent out the land, which they leased from the government, by making deals illegally with people whom they brought from other regions, mainly from the Amhara regional state. These investors distribute their leased land for many of those migrant workers who originally came to work as wage labourers in the commercial farms. These labourers normally work on the farm while

> living in temporary shelters constructed on part of the land. This way, the investors collect rents from these peasants/wage labourers who farm the land in fragmented ways usually using animal power. This is simply anti-development activity and a rent-seeking behaviour. (Interview, Assosa, 18 April 2012)

Most of the informants clearly pointed out that this is because the system by which such "investors" acquired land did not take into account whether the applicants actually have investible capital and overall development capability (Interviews, April–June 2012). The limited consideration of investor's development competence can be interpreted in two ways. One is the intention of reducing restrictions in order to significantly attract potential investors, as the region is a remote area on the borderland with limited infrastructural facilities. The other is that this was intentionally overlooked to leave some grey area over which some rent-seeking government officials and their associates participated in the land acquisitions. There is, in fact, evidence that some government officials were involved in the land acquisitions. Informants in Guba *woreda* disclosed that at least seven former local officials, including former heads of *woreda* government offices, a former regional bureau head and a former member of the Ethiopian parliament, held investment lands ranging from 200 to 400 hectares in different *kebeles* within the *woreda* (Interview, June 2012). During the fieldwork, we were also able to witness, by sheer coincidence, one former high-ranking government official of the regional state applying for substantial agricultural investment land in Guba *woreda*.[9]

The current trend of land acquisitions in the region is further demonstrated in a recent assessment report that shows that some investors did not even have any legal contract or agreement with responsible government offices.[10] The report revealed that about 40 investors held land within the region without any contract with the government; out of which 23 were found in Metekel Zone, eight in Assosa Zone and the remaining seven in Kemashi Zone. In relation to this case, one informant from the regional government office stated that with only an investment certificate some investors have been using land after acquiring it through informal ways, often by dealing directly with local- and district-level political elites (Interview, Assosa, April 2012). By capitalising on existing ambiguities and overlaps in enforcement and implementation of land leasing regulations, as well as the lack of clarity about the roles of various state actors, many

domestic economic and political elites have been able to use the opportunities created for their private benefit. As the regional government official explained, some investors – particularly those whose political connections give them the muscle to do so – were able to acquire land and start using it prior to establishing the required deal with relevant regional offices. Local authorities were simply told that the tedious administrative process was under way. Sometimes, evidently, the local authorities are swayed by the development opportunities that such investments are claimed to bring (Interview, Assosa, April 2012).

A new land proclamation was adopted in 2010 to address existing wide concerns and anomalies with regard to the land sector across the region. As stated in article 20 (2q) of the regional state's land proclamation number 85/2010, "rural land investment activities carried out without consideration of investor development capability and environmental concerns, prior the proclamation, shall make corrections step by step through study and appropriate law." Accordingly, some measures have been taken following this proclamation. Information obtained from the Regional Investment Office indicates that a total of 32 agricultural investment projects have been cancelled for different reasons. Despite this, unsurprisingly some of these cancelled projects were still using the land. A key informant, who was one of the team that prepared the regional government's assessment report mentioned earlier, indicated that those previously cancelled eight projects in Guba *woreda* were found to be using the land, as observed during field visits in connection with the assessment (Interview, Assosa, April 2012).

Increasing levels of land transfers to investors have been directly carried out by the federal government, despite the constitutional proclamation that granted regions the authority to administer land and other natural resources. However, as Zewde (2008: 353) notes, "political power (alas!) has its own logic; it is not necessarily bound by promises and constitutional guarantees". It has been argued that the trend of administering land by the federal government is justified in relation to the prevailing limited capacity of the regional government to manage substantial land investments. The argument was that the lack of adequate institutional infrastructure among "emerging regions" to govern land deals involving large commercial investments could lead to corruption. Almost all informants from the re-

gional government offices admitted the tendency to allow the federal government to act where institutional capacity in the region was weak. A key informant from the regional government office observes:

> Currently, the regional government does not have strong institutional capacity to promote and attract potential investors, especially foreign companies. Previously, land investment and administration processes involved many offices. But since 2010, the BoEPLAU has predominantly handled these responsibilities. As a newly established office, it has limited technical and administrative capacity to manage growing land investments. So we believe that the involvement of the federal government to attract investors will fill the observed gaps in the regional trend. So far, in addition to domestic investors, Indian and UK companies have come to our region through the federal government. In terms of their investment capacity and overall potential, these investors are much better when compared with those investors who have been granted land by the regional government. (Interview, Assosa, 18 April 2012)

Nevertheless, quite some criticism has been expressed regarding the involvement of the federal government in the administration of investment lands, with particular concerns over the implied processes and relations of power. Information collected during our fieldwork reveals that neither local communities nor respective regional authorities were involved in the land deals committed so far by the federal government (Interviews, April–May 2012). It appears difficult for the regional government to challenge and negotiate land transfers that have been or will potentially affect local land rights, or to promote investments based on distinct regional socio-economic and ecological contexts. Interestingly, during the fieldwork, detailed information on those investment projects that have already acquired land through the federal government was not available in any of the regional offices. What we found was a partial list that was sent by the Ministry of Agriculture. The respective regional authorities were not even clear about the identity of some of the investors and lacked information about the size or location of land allocated directly by the federal government. The critical point that emerges is that the regional government is either unable or unwilling to take any steps to ensure that benefits from agricultural investments actually accrue to the regional state and its people. For instance, this was manifested in the assessment report (mentioned earlier) of agricultural investment projects, produced by the regional government, in which those investment projects that were

allotted land by the federal government were not part of the report. Informants from regional authorities mentioned that the assessment team excluded land deals administered by the federal government and instead focused only on projects that have acquired land through the regional government (Interview, April 2012). This demonstrates inherent asymmetries in political power that exists between the regional state and the federal government, the latter having undisputed sway. It also apparently contradicts decentralised political power and decision-making in rural land administration, although this is the desire clearly stipulated in the land administration proclamations both by federal and regional governments. As a result, local and regional authorities have now exerted little or no influence over substantial land deals administered by the federal government that could have considerable impact on local land uses and biodiversity. In addition, there is absence of any unified monitoring and evaluation system for the land investment projects. The outcome is simply competing power, and some conflict over procedures and processes. As has been observed in many sub-Saharan African countries, "putting decentralisation into practice has been hindered by vested interests in retaining central control over decision authority or resource rents, limited capacity, and the widespread tendency to devolve responsibilities without corresponding resources and authority" (German et al. 2013: 2-3).

While it has been accepted to some extent that the regional state does not have strong institutional and technical capacity to effectively coordinate and administer its land and other natural resources, resorting to administering land by centralised federal government bureaucracies complicates the process and creates adverse consequences. Such a trend preserves the hegemony of the central state over the regional state and its people, which is to some extent a repetition of the central state's historical monopoly of state power during the previous regimes. It would have been sound and convincing had the federal government embarked on building and strengthening existing regional institutions through the provision of continuous capacity-building trainings and technologies to strengthen its organisational infrastructure. An informant from the regional office indicated that, so far, only 10 days of short training on the application of GPS technology and data processing has been organised by AISD of the Ministry of Agriculture for land administration personnel recruited from *woreda*, zonal and regional offices (Interview, Assosa, April 2012).

The hegemony of the federal government in decision-making power, as well as the regional trends exhibited so far in land allocation processes, is based, we argue, on the historically rooted prejudice that indigenous ethnic groups of the region are "backward" and their traditional practices are impediments to intensifying the utilisation of natural resources. In contrast with other countries, in which global drivers have paramount influence, agricultural investments in Ethiopia, particularly in its lowland regions, are planned on a grand scale as central to the government's current development strategy (MoFED 2010). Therefore, while the land acquisitions are contested and negotiated in practice at regional level, the overall policy is set at the federal level. This is also closely related to the fact that the state is the owner of all land and that various state actors have power in various degrees to designate and expropriate land for "the public interest" or for "development" purposes. As Ribot and Peluso (2003: 169) noted, "discourse and the ability to shape discursive terms deeply influence entire frameworks" around land investment and development.

Existing discourses overwhelmingly resulted in the misrepresentation and exclusion of local communities from participating in the identification, delineation, and transfer of substantial land to investors, although this process could have an enormous impact on them. This is not an exception to the historical exploitation and marginalisation of indigenous people such as the Gumuz and other groups who inhabited lowland areas on the borderlands, which were once sources of ivory, gold and slaves (Donham 2002, Ahmad 1999). These historical relations have greatly influenced the socio-economic and political positions of ethnic groups of the region and are still visible when compared with other highland regions. The Benishangul-Gumuz region endured a long history of exploitation by the central state and has been marginal to state power (Pankhurst 1977, Abbute 2002, Markakis 2011). As noted by Zewde (2008: 273) "for the Ethiopian highlanders, the lowlands long signified little more than a natural hunting ground for elephants and slaves, and a source of tribute more raided than collected". Since 1991, although the region has been granted significant power of self-administration associated with the creation of an ethnic-based federal system, it appears that in practice the region has only nominal authority to administer its land resources, especially when it comes to much of its potentially cultivable land that can be brought under large-scale commercial agriculture (see also Markakis 2011: 260, Lavers 2012b: 814, Keeley et al. 2014).

In the Benishangul-Gumuz region and other "emerging regions" of the country, there is a particular political economy, and a tension – centred on ethnicity – with the central state, which is often seen as an oppressor and extractor of resources. Thus, external capital and the federal state are seen from the local perspective as one, with a common purpose. As we have argued, the central state has a key concern associated with the control of territory and people in "marginal" areas, and cannot devolve power to the regional state governments in practice. As Alden-Wily (2003) noted, in sub-Saharan Africa "already there are signs that governments do not always sustain their enthusiasm for decentralized mechanisms when they confront the realities of implementation or the loss of control over the periphery that some of the more genuine moves towards decentralization embody. Nor do decentralized approaches always sit easily with other common objectives of current reforms" (Alden-Wily 2003: i).[11]

Given the prevailing politics of decentralisation, the federal government offices have neither the legitimacy nor the local knowledge and capacity to effectively administer land deals in remote areas on the borderlands and cannot provide appropriate contextualised responses to land-related local issues that arise. What has resulted from direct federal government involvement in the formal land deals is, indeed, conflict and overlap with regional state level authority. This competition over control of land resources creates fault lines that can be used by some local elites and interest groups to their own benefit. This also means that the legitimate authority to monitor the investment projects is equally at stake. This trend in fact poses threats to the territorial rights of indigenous local communities as well as to the environment as shown in the next section.

7.3 The implications of land acquisitions for local livelihoods and the environment

While Ethiopia is in general categorized as one of the most land-constrained countries in Africa (Jayne et al. 2003), a few of its regions still have relatively abundant land that can be used for sustainable cultivation. Benishangul-Gumuz region is one of these few areas which provides such opportunities for the expansion of cultivated land, provided that due recognition is given to its distinct land use practices of different ethnic groups and its fragile ecological contexts. Significant numbers of investors have acquired land across the region that was once viewed as peripheral and

neglected during the previous successive political regimes. However, despite claims of generating high economic and social returns through increased levels of rural employment, improved local infrastructure, skill and technology transfer, and food security, the rising land acquisitions appear to have had adverse impacts on local land-use practices and land resources, including land dispossession, declining access to resources and environmental destruction. This section demonstrates how current large-scale land acquisitions have created adverse impacts on local livelihoods and the environment.

7.3.1 Land dispossessions and declining access to land resources

One of the major adverse implications of current land acquisitions is the loss of local land rights and land-use practices. Most of the indigenous ethnic groups in the region mainly depend on shifting cultivation. Both the Berta and Gumuz people (the dominant groups in the region) and the Mao and Komo are shifting cultivators who practice slash and burn agriculture. Natural resources are the source of basic livelihoods for these groups being the sources of food providing a common ground for gathering forest foods, hunting, fishing, honey collection and traditional alluvial gold mining. The Gumuz, who originally and predominantly inhabited the Metekel area, have suffered continuously from encroachments by highlander plough cultivators across political regimes (Abbute 2002, Gebre 2003). In addition to impact of decades of gradual encroachments by the highlander plough cultivators, the forced resettlement schemes of the Derg regime in the 1980s and state farm expansions that together had deprived the Gumuz from practicing their traditional livelihood activities and pushed them further down to the peripheral lowlands (ibid), rapidly emerging trends of land acquisitions for commercial agricultural investment have created additional challenges by exerting intensified pressures on them. The Gumuz overwhelmingly perceive land acquisitions by investors as inimical to their local livelihoods and the environment. Although land scarcity is not a problem – at least for the moment – the Gumuz interviewed in all the study *kebeles* invariably felt that this will soon become a reality due to the enclosure of large land resources they had previously had access to under their traditional system of tenure. A Gumuz farmer from the Qotta *kebele* in the Dangur *woreda*, for example, explained the situation as follows:

> There are six investors who have acquired land in our *kebele*. These investors claimed very large tracts of land, leaving our village in the middle. For example, one investor [S &P Energy Solutions] alone took 50,000 hectares of land. Can you imagine how much land is left for us? As we are totally encircled by these investors, we don't have a hope of expanding our farm lands and continue practicing our traditional farming practices such as fallowing as we used to do in the past, before the arrival of investors. As to my knowledge, the farmlands of ten households have been taken by one of these investors. We are now left with little land and we are very worried for our children. Due to this situation, we are even forced to keep our goats within the village and at the edges of our crop fields. Because of this, our goats often encroach into the crop fields, causing damages to our planted crops. In the past, we used to keep our animals in the fields opposite to the village community's cultivated lands, but this is no longer possible (Interview, Qotta *kebele*, May 2012).

According to an expert in the Guba *woreda*'s Agriculture Office, some efforts have usually been made to protect villages in the process of land allocations (Interview, June 2012). One of the measures is that the lands allocated to investors must be beyond a five kilometers radius from villages even though this is quite limited, as the farmers are shifting cultivators and also depend on multi-niche livelihood sources accessed from the forest (ibid.).

Unlike the highlanders, the Gumuz people do not cultivate their fields intensively. Rather, they cultivate a given plot of land for about 3 to 5 years, then they leave it to lie fallow when a decline in yield is perceived. Within their clan territory, new land is then cleared and cultivated in the same way until the yield is again seen to deplete. In the process, the whole village or part of the village may also be abandoned if the newly acquired lands are located too far from current villages. However, the Gumuz do not in fact move to new places all the time but rather move around and return back to their abandoned lands that were left to regenerate. This shifting cultivation system is practices according to their customary practice of land access and control. To the Gumuz, land resources are communal property and rights to these resources are derived from the clan. Individual members thus have usufruct rights enabling them to clear and cultivate the land within the boundary of their clan. In this way, they enjoy possession rights over the land they are cultivating until they leave it fallow. Once they leave the land unused, other members of the clan can use

it. Generally, the real owner of the land is the clan, not individuals (see also Rahmato 1988, Abbute 2002). It is this fluid and complex customary land-based social relationship that has been at stake because of the large-scale land acquisitions underway in many parts of the region.

In interviews, farmers indicated that the lands that have been laying fallow, abandoned villages and forestlands are now largely converted into permanent farmlands by investors. A Gumuz farmer in his late thirties from the Qotta *kebele* explains how the situation has changed:

> The government told us that we should stay in a permanent village, farming fields close to our villages so that we will be provided with schools, health posts, and water pumps. Recently, a lot of people have been relocated to our village from various scattered places, and the *kebele* allotted these households with small plots of land for their survival. Due to this situation we cannot continue practicing our traditional farming practices anymore, unless we totally move to very remote areas that could not be reached easily and which aren't suitable for their cars [tractors] (Interview, Qotta *kebele*, May 2012).

Another farmer, who had recently been relocated to a newly established village under the regional government's ongoing program of villagization – in which scattered small villages are collected into designated settlements – expressed his sentiments:

> It is so bad! …land was abundant in the place where I was living before we were relocated to this village. If you are strong, you can clear and cultivate as much land as you can. Here, they gave me a piece of land because there is not much land left for us here. In any direction you go from this village you will encounter investors' land. I was about to go back to my previous village, but one of the investors who have been there for the last two years has now taken over all our previous lands. We want our land back. As a Gumuz, land is what we have. Now, we are aware that the campaign of collecting our people into big settlements along the main road is meant to take our lands and give it away to investors. Nobody cares about us. Nobody! What did these investors do for us since they came here? Nothing! What we have seen is destruction, nothing else (Interview, Dangur *woreda*, May 2012).

According to the regional government's villagization plan for 2011/2012, it envisaged settling 19,763 households from their scattered settlements to designated villages across most of the *woredas* within the region

(BGRS 2011). In the current study areas of Dangur *woreda* and Guba *woreda* alone, it was planned to settle nearly 3,000 households into 14 permanent villages by displacing them from their scattered small villages (BGRS 2011). A regional government official interviewed expressed that while the major objective of the villagization program is to deliver basic infrastructure and services to deprived indigenous communities, there has been an implicit objective of making the expansion of commercial agricultural investments smooth through 'planned relocations', as most of these households inhabit large areas of underutilized lands (Interview, Assosa, April 2012). Indeed, as the account above demonstrated, Gumuz informants interviewed in the Dangur *woreda* – who had been recently relocated to newly designated villages – were quite explicit in indicating that most of their previous lands had already been transferred to investors; they expected that the remainder will also inevitably be given away soon. In interviews, some relocated people complained that the provision of infrastructures and services has been very minimal in the newly resettled villages, thus challenging the motives behind the programme (Interview, Ayicid *kebele*, 6 June 2012). A Gumuz informant living in a village that was created in Ayicid *kebele* (Guba *woreda*) under the villagization program explained the situation as follows:

> We came to this new village without our consent. The *woreda* officials instructed us to leave our previous village. Initially, we tried to refuse, asking the officials: Why do we need to leave? Why are you forcing us? The officials told us that this was an order from the federal government that we cannot refuse, and threatened us to accept it. They said that, if we refuse, they will bring the federal police forces so that we will face the consequences. It was because of this high pressure that we decided to leave. We finally complied with the government's order, but since we came here we have been faced with a lot of problems. Especially the lack of water is a serious problem. We even managed to construct the houses that you see here from the materials that we brought from our previous villages, by demolishing the previous ones. We are not even provided with water facilities as they promised. It might surprise you to hear, but women now fetch water from our previous village, as it is not far from here. (Interview, Ayicid *kebele*, 6 June 2012)

As the field investigation suggests, the threat of displacement has been on the rise in the region. For example, the land deal between Tracon Trading and the federal government – involving 5,000 hectares of land in the Dangur *woreda* – is to displace the villagers from both their cultivated lands

and their homes. This is because the land was allocated based on satellite imagery of the area, without undertaking proper verification – the typical process through which investment land is currently identified. An interviewed Dangur *woreda* council official explained that:

> Although not based on detailed field studies, there exists large unused land in this *woreda* which can be developed for commercial agriculture. The available investment land in most of the *kebeles* is transferred to the federal land bank, and the federal government has already prepared map of these lands, based on satellite images. The trend is that investors normally come to us with the map of the allocated land and then actual work of the transfer is carried out based on the coordinates obtained from the maps. But this process has been creating a lot of problems. For instance, during the actual work of transferring the coordinate points into exact locations on the ground, major problems have been encountered including overlaps on existing cultivated lands, settlements, forest and protected areas as well as on lands already transferred to investors by the regional government. This was the case with regard to the land transferred to Tracon Trading, to mention one as an example. The transferred land was not actually unoccupied land. The whole Dachigeri *kebele* including settlements and cultivated lands fall within the land areas transferred. Due to this, the *woreda* council intervened to address the problem, at least for now. The decision was that the affected communities should continue staying on their current place for this year and by next year, after they have collected their harvest the communities would be relocated to another nearby place. The company has been allowed to start developing part of the land that is currently not cultivated by the *kebele* community until the whole village is moved to another location. (Interview, Manbouk town, 29 May 2012)

The *woreda* official further explained that most of the investors who came to the Dangur *woreda* through the federal government came with maps falling in Qotta *kebele* for reasons he did not understand (Interview, Manbouk town, 29 May 2012). This concentration created overlaps not only with the local communities' cultivated lands, but also between the lands transferred to investors, leading to several land disputes. In the Qotta *kebele*, about fourteen peasants lost their cultivated lands and none of them were neither received any compensation for the loss nor are they given other land. As expressed by local informants and confirmed by the *kebele* Administrator, many other farmers had been cultivating lands already allocated to the investment projects; these farmers had been told

that they will be made to leave at any moment. The field observation and discussions with community members also revealed that track roads leading to the various investment projects passed through some farmers's lands, causing damages to their cultivated areas. The situation caused frustrations and insecurity among the local communities of the *kebele* due to the heightened pressure on the available land and other natural resources. In interviews and discussions, many farmers of the *kebele* felt that they were at risk of losing their land; they were also aware of the disappearance of their once abundant land resources. Several of them indicated that they wanted all investors to leave, persistently appealing to *kebele* authorities for this reason. In the Gimtiya *kebele*, community leaders estimated that about thirty farmers have lost their farmlands because of the investment projects.

Additionally, the fieldwork in the Homosha *woreda* revealed that the farmland of eight Berta farmers was taken over by one of the domestic investors, Balzaf Alcohol and Drinks Factory Plc, which has acquired 1,031 hectares of land in the Tsori Al Metema *kebele*. Similarly to the previously mentioned Gumuz farmers of the Qotta *kebele*, the Berta farmers had not been compensated for their losses. Generally, what makes the indigenous ethnic groups more vulnerable possibly relates to the fact that neither their customary land rights have been respected nor are their use rights formally registered.[12] In spite of this, farmers interviewed assert that they do not feel insecure because of their existing customary land tenure system; but they indicated that the increasing land investments have resulted in uncertainties about their traditional land rights (Interview, April–June 2012).

In circumstances that involve overlaps and evictions, local authorities have generally tended to intervene in favor of the investors. Moreover, when the disputes are between investors, the demands of those investors who acquired land through the federal government prevailed over those who acquired through the regional government. This was illustrated by the case of Dachigeri *kebele* where displacing the entire village was 'inevitable', only postponed to the following year. Farmers in Qotta *kebele*, who were cultivating lands already allocated to investors, were also helplessly waiting for their imminent eviction which was scheduled for next year.

Generally, local communities as well as local government authorities appear powerless to contest land deals committed by the federal government. This has been problematic to defend local land claims and to engage in negotiations that protect land rights of local people.

More than anything else, the considerable environmental destruction in recent years attributed to commercial land investments across the region is deeply troubling. The arbitrariness of the land allocations to investors, implemented without the necessary detailed socio-cultural, economic, and ecological studies, has had adverse impacts on the environmental and natural resources. This in turn has had a considerably negative impact on the indigenous communities, whose livelihoods are heavily based on access to natural resources. In contrast to the widespread concerns and initiatives addressing environmental degradation in the country's highland regions, no attention has been paid to the environmental impacts of the current land investment trends in the Benishangul-Gumuz region. Information obtained from the BoEPLAU shows that none of the numerous investment projects scattered throughout the region carried out environmental soundness assessments (Interview, Assosa, April 2012). Interestingly, not even a single environmental impact assessment document was found in the responsible offices during the fieldwork.

All Gumuz and Berta informants were deeply unsatisfied with the ways in which the indigenous natural forests have been cleared to prepare farm fields. According to the informants vast forest areas have been indiscriminately cleared and in addition, fire has been used intentionally for burning standing trees to ensure that they would not regenerate. The local communities have already begun to feel the effects of these practices, including declining forest food sources, deterioration of their livelihoods, and the resulting growing need for food aid. Alongside and supplementary to their shifting cultivation, the forest has been a source of traditional food items for the Gumuz, including plant shoots, roots, leaves and fruits. Although they hardly received food aid, informants indicated that there has been growing need to it in recent years due to the deteriorating local livelihood sources that traditionally provided safety nets during few months of food shortages. Wild forest foods have not only been consumed in times of crop failure or food shortages, but also as part of the group's vital daily diet. Women informants explained that, before the arrival of the investors and the resulting deforestation and enclosures, wild edible leaves such as *kaakima* and roots like *echa* and *cici* could easily be collected close to the

village (Interview, Qotta *kebele*, May 2012). Women are now required to travel far from the villages to gather these forest foods. They also complained that some area-specific forest foods have been disappearing, or could no longer be accessed due to enclosures. Among the Gumuz, women perform numerous livelihood activities, more so than the men of the group. In addition to fully participating in farming activities, they also shoulder the key responsibility of feeding the family on the daily basis. Indeed, the deterioration of local livelihood sources is more likely to worsen their situation.

The informants also noted the disappearance of some wild animals. As one informant in Dangur stated:

> We were able to hunt many wild animals at a short distance [from the village]. But after these investors invaded us, the animals started to disappear and move to the remaining remote forested areas. I tell you; we will not see a single *Guanja* here by next year (Interview, Qotta *kebele*, May 2012).[13]

In interviews, both experts and *woreda*, zonal and regional authorities unanimously confirmed the significant and rapidly increasing trend of environmental destruction caused by land investments (Interviews, April – June 2012). The informants also underscored that the lack of an appropriate regional land use plan – which would be the basis for land use and management decisions – has contributed to the environmental destruction. A widespread perception of land availability throughout the region has tended to undermine efforts towards efficient utilization of land and natural resources. This notion has led to a land allocation process that has been based on neither a classification of the existing land uses, nor a genuine participation of local communities. Thus, very little attention has been paid to protecting settlements, existing cultivated lands, or forest and protected areas that sustain environmental services and local livelihoods. It appears that focus has instead been laid on attracting as many investors as possible to the region.

The natural resource management experts that were interviewed at the *woreda* and regional offices indicated that vast land areas have been cleared under the ongoing indiscriminate act of deforestation. These areas are covered by indigenous forest species with economic value – including lowland bamboo, incense trees, gum trees, and *Zobi* (Interviews, April–June 2012). For example, the lowland bamboo tree – which is widely available in the

region – is traditionally used by the local people for a wide range of purposes, including the construction of houses, fences, cattle barns, baskets, furniture (stools, chairs, etc), granaries, tools, traditional beehives, traditional musical instruments, and firewood.[14] Additionally, its sprouts serve as an important source of food. Moreover, scientifically lowland bamboo trees are said to have high carbon sequestration capacity, providing critical ecological services. Despite its enormous importance, extensive areas of land covered by bamboo vegetation have been allocated to investors, which led to their destruction. Contentiously, through the federal government, 3,000 hectares of land with thick bamboo vegetation in the Guba *woreda* were recently allocated to the domestic investor Kehedem Trading. The land is located in the Ayicid *kebele,* on the left side of the main road from Gublak to Mankush and bordered by the Beles River on the other side. According to informants, the area was designated as protected forestland because of its rich bamboo vegetation and wildlife biodiversity. The interviewed experts further stressed that the land was not actually suitable for commercial agriculture, and that the project's feasibility was deeply questioned due to the nature of the landscape. For these reasons, the land transfer was contested by the local inhabitants, experts and local authorities. As the fieldwork for this particular study was underway, there was a widely circulating rumor among both experts and *woreda* and zonal authorities related to the transfer of the area which is known for its rich woodland, water and wildlife resources. This area covers large tracts of land both in Dangur and Guba *woredas,* and is bordered by Alatish Park in the Quara *woreda* of the Amhara regional state, the boundary being marked by the Ayima River.

As most of the land allocations have been carried out without appropriate feasibility studies, forested areas not suitable for cultivation – particularly via mechanized farming – have been transferred to investors. As a result, some of the investors who acquired the unsuitable lands ceased cultivation after clearing large areas covered by natural forest. For example, all along the road between Mankush and Almahal town in the Guba *woreda*, as observed during the fieldwork, six to eight investors abandoned the land they had been allotted after clearing away its thick forest cover and cultivating for about one agricultural season or so. Strikingly, these investors have already acquired replacement lands in other *kebeles* within the same *woreda*. In the Guba *woreda*, areas covered by naturally grown incense and gum trees have also been allocated to investment projects while

disregarding their high economic values for the local communities and the country.[15] Such uninformed land allocation practices, which indiscriminately allocate large areas of forestlands to investors, are more likely to have adverse impacts on the natural environment, and thus, on the local livelihoods. The clear negligence that has been documented so far with regard to protecting forested areas is particularly distressing being also a manifestation of the hegemonic character of the current land allocations.

Additionally, the ways in which the allocated land has been used and managed by investors also raise sustainability concerns. According to the interviewed experts, most of the investors have been utilizing their land without preparing sound and efficient land use plans to ensure that the land is utilized in an environmentally sustainable way (Interviews, April-June 2012). Some of the elements that need to be carefully considered while developing the land include the distance from water bodies and gullies, the number of trees left per hectare, and the slope of the land. However, these criteria have rarely been met. For example, the Ethiopian Parliament's standing committee on environmental matters recently criticized the way in which the domestic investor Balzaf Alcohol and Liquor Plc has been utilizing its leased land in the Homosha *woreda* after its field visits to the area. Moreover, some investors have been blamed for failing to use the land for its intended objectives. Informants in the Dangur, Guba, and Homosha *woredas* indicated that some investors have been engaged in the production of timber and charcoal, even if such activities are illegal. In this regard, the interviewed regional official mentioned that, at times, some investors have asked permissions to transport their produced charcoal for sale in nearby towns (Interview, Assosa, April 2012). Similarly, a representative of one of the NGOs working in the region also confirmed that some investors were producing charcoal, even as the local inhabitants were being told to refrain from such activities.

7.4 Conclusions

This chapter has uncovered the scale of land acquisitions throughout the Benishangul-Gumuz region. Contradictions in the land acquisition process suggest a tendency for subaltern groups, particularly the poor, marginalized and vulnerable indigenous communities, to be displaced from their land, and have their livelihoods disrupted, causing land contestations. The ongoing land allocation process, largely predicated on the perception

by the state and other elite groups of abundant "underutilized" or "unoccupied" land in the region, overlooks traditional land use practices and the social relations of local communities. As there are inherent differences between various actors, who assign different meanings and values to existing local land uses, the concern should not be so much on the claim that abundant land resources exist, but rather on the ways through which the available land has been identified, delineated and transferred. Genuine community consultation and participation have not been part of the land acquisition process. Instead, hegemonic representations by the state have prevailed, expressed in the manipulation of existing institutional and administrative frameworks over the allocation of land for commercial investments, and in terms of "access control": the ability to determine who gets to use land for what purpose. Undoubtedly, there would be gains for some local economic and political elites, as well as the state, from such acquisitions, but there will be little gain and possibly great loss for the region's local communities. What attention is paid by the authorities to the impact of land acquisition tends to be based on dewy-eyed optimism.

As this chapter reveals, the role of local and regional state authorities in relation to land allocation has been greatly undermined because of the direct intervention of central state elites. It appears that the increasing direct involvement of the federal government has been regarded by the regional authorities with mixed feelings. It is welcomed as a contribution to expand land investments, but also seen as a limitation of the regional state's authority over decisions regarding its land resources. The contestations that emerge over land resources and authority show the nature of political (and economic) power relations between the federal government and the regional states. In the strategic case of land development, it appears that the federal government would not devolve practical authority to regional states, despite the constitutional provision to do so. This potential contest among and within state actors (regional and federal) may adversely affect the land rights of local communities, who are least able to defend their rights against the current combined weight of the state and other elite actors. The ongoing large-scale land acquisition is thus very much the result of state policy and intra-elite dynamics.

Although the government has acknowledged that the plan has not worked out so far in the way it was envisaged, given its policies of promoting large-scale export-oriented agriculture, more land transfers are likely to occur in the future, as much land has already been earmarked for

this purpose. However, an increase in such land transfers would certainly depend on the ability of investors to deliver on their promises to the government in the short term: actually developing the land leased, raising agricultural productivity and producing goods for export. If there is no clear evidence of benefits accruing to the state from the agricultural investment projects, then this may affect the state's continued support for such large-scale land transfers. In this regard, it seems that the government has already started rethinking such large-scale land leases, as some of the projects appear to have failed to materialize or have not lived up to expectations (see Keeley et al. 2014).

Notes

[1] This chapter is based on Tsegaye Moreda and Max Spoor (2015) 'The politics of large-scale land acquisitions in Ethiopia: state and corporate elites and subaltern villagers', *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 36 (2): 224-240; Tsegaye Moreda (2016) 'Large-scale land acquisitions, state authority and indigenous local communities: insights from Ethiopia', *Third World Quarterly*; DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2016.1191941, and Tsegaye Moreda (2013) 'Postponed local concerns? Implications of land acquisitions for indigenous local communities in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, Ethiopia'. LDPI Working Paper 13.

[2] By elites, we mean the state and global, national and local corporate/economic and political elites. The contenders for authority over the control of land are the federal and regional state elites. In this regard, the role of the state is conceived not only as a public entity but also its representatives at different hierarchies acting in their own private interests.

[3] The Regional Investment Board is composed of members from the regional state council, the investment office, Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use, Bureau of Agriculture, Bureau of Finance and Economic Development, and the Revenue Office.

[4] The lease period in the regional state ranges from 15 to 40 years.

[5] Interview with BoEPLAU senior official, conducted by the first author in April 2012, in Assosa.

[6] Regional land administration and use proclamation number 85/2010 (BGRS 2010). Note that the term "land speculation" is used here not in its full sense.

[7] Note that the figures do not include land transfers in the region that are administered by the federal government.

[8] The informant contended that they are called investors only for the reason that they have leased land, in a way to explicitly question their competence.

[9] This happened while I was at Guba *woreda* Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use Branch Office and Agriculture Office for consultations as part of the fieldwork.

[10] This was a joint assessment report on agricultural investment projects by BoEPLAU and Investment Office, May 2012, Assosa.

[11] In the case of post-1991 Ethiopia, despite the establishment of a federal political system aimed at decentralising state power to regional constituents, the way in which the ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – a coalition of ethnic-based parties – has been organized under a centralized party structure appears to undermine the objective of devolving power to regional state governments. The EPRDF controls all regional state governments either directly through its coalition member parties or indirectly through its affiliates. Regional state governments are not likely to operate independently of this party in power at federal level to pursue their regional interests or genuinely represent them at the federal level (Aalen 2002, Makki 2012).

[12] Unlike other regions, for instance the Amhara region, land registration and certification has not been undertaken in the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state and, thus, traditional land-tenure systems are still widely practiced. Note that the difference in the de facto tenure system between highland regions and the lowlands, including the Benishangul-Gumuz region, cannot be attributed to the absence of land registration in the latter, as land registration is a recent phenomenon that took place in most highland areas only from 2003 onwards. Despite the Derg's 1975 land reform proclamation that abolished differences in land tenure over the whole country by distributing usufruct rights only, tenure in the highlands has long been based on individual holdings, while customary forms of tenure have been largely practiced in the lowland regions.

[13] *Guanja* is the local name of one of the animals commonly hunted by the Gumuz for food. Its equivalent name in Amharic is *Midaqua* and in English, Duiker.

[14] The steam cover of bamboo is used in roofing and the construction of traditional beehives. The hollow bamboo is also used for making traditional musical instruments (widely used among the indigenous local communities). Cups used for drinking coffee and water jars are made out of the bamboo's stem (culms), which is cut into small pieces.

[15] Despite this, about 37,000 hectares covered by natural plantations of incense and gum trees in the Guba *woreda* have been granted to three domestic investors that would harvest the plantations for domestic and export markets. The companies are: Ethiopian Gums and Incense Enterprise (12,000 ha), Beles Plc (15,000 ha), and Meskerem Natural Gum and Incense Enterprise (10,000 ha). Generally, some *woredas* in the region – such as Guba, Kurmuk, Sherkole, and Sirba Abay – are endowed with naturally growing incense and gum trees.

8 The Political reactions of affected communities to large-scale land acquisitions in the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state [1]

8.1 Introduction

The politically contested nature of land and land access has become more so in the context of current global land rush, in which Ethiopia is a global hotspot. This chapter sets out to examine how local indigenous communities perceive ongoing large-scale land acquisitions in Ethiopia, and how these communities, with a particular focus on the Gumuz people in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, have been reacting to them.

Ethiopia could be cited as an example of a country in which large-scale agricultural investments are growing ever larger. Clearly upward trends in land acquisitions, by both domestic and foreign investors, have been observed over the last few years, mainly in the lowland parts of the country. As the land acquisitions have proceeded, civil society and human rights groups, opposition political parties, academics and researchers have increasingly expressed their concerns, emphasizing that these land acquisitions are threatening local livelihoods and the environment. Emerging but limited empirical studies focusing particularly on questions of local land rights have demonstrated the implication of land deals on local communities (Rahmato 2011, Lavers 2012a, Shete 2012, see also Chapter 7). As is the case of Ethiopia, where the state formally owns land and at the same time is sympathetic to large investments in land, it is rather common for local communities to lose out in the process, since they cannot effectively negotiate under a situation of wider inequalities in bargaining power (e.g., von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009: 2). This is exacerbated in areas where customary land rights are not respected or where clearly defined property rights and effective judicial systems to protect such rights do not exist or

are weak.[2] Historical experiences suggest that land rights often define or are a reflection of the dynamics of power relationships that exist between peasants and the state. Control over land resources has always been the main source of political power, and the basis for state hegemony in which the state assumes a decisive role over rights of access to and disposal of land resources (Rahmato 2009: 283).

Land-based political power is of particular concern today as pressure and competition for land resources are alarmingly high. In light of this, there is no doubt that land acquisitions are disrupting local land-based social relations, as the land rights of local communities are pushed aside when powerful interest groups, including the state, need the land (Borras et al. 2011, Li 2011, HLPE 2011, Toulmin 2008, Visser and Spoor 2011). Practically, the land acquisitions taking place in many developing countries are not based on a consideration of "the complex and messy actually existing land-based social relations" (Borras and Franco 2010a: 34), but rather rely predominantly on simplified categorizations by the state (Scott 1998).[3] For instance, indigenous ethnic groups in the Benishangul-Gumuz region that have distinct and long-standing local land-based social relations and territorial claims are now under renewed pressure because of current trends of land acquisitions by more powerful interests (see Chapter 7). This is because the land acquisition processes are largely carried out on the perception of abundant 'unoccupied' land availability in the region, in which existing traditional land-use practices and social relations that are rooted in the traditions of indigenous communities have been or are being deliberately overlooked. Studies conducted so far in the country related to the issue, though limited, show that adverse implications have already occurred to these indigenous communities and their environment, and contend that these will likely worsen further in the future (e.g., Rahmato 2011, Kelbessa et al. 2009, Shete 2011, Fisseha 2011, Lavers 2012b). For example, Rahmato (2011), through a case study in Bako Tibee *woreda* (Oromiya region) and Gambella region, demonstrated how the land acquisitions caused land displacement and damage to the livelihoods of local communities by depriving them from accessing 'vital resources from what until now was their common property'.[4] Beyond looking at the impact of land investments, recent papers by Lavers (2012a, 2012b) make a useful analysis of the role of domestic political economy and the state in influencing emerging patterns of agrarian transformation in the country. Yet these existing studies make only passing reference to, or say nothing at all about,

local reactions (responses) to these growing land acquisitions. Nor do they help us understand how local communities are trying to engage with or challenged the land acquisitions. Therefore, it is essential to empirically demonstrate how affected indigenous communities perceive and react to the land acquisitions and why.

Large-scale land acquisitions do not always result in people losing their land, although in many instances they have led to the dispossession and displacement of peasants and indigenous people (see Chapter 7). Those people affected by such acquisitions may not necessarily engage in outright resistance, as this depends on the particular economic, political, social and cultural contexts in which they are situated (Borras and Franco 2013). When resistance does occur, it occurs in a differentiated way depending on the economic and political agencies involved. Likewise, the choice of which strategies of resistance to use tend to varies depending largely on the specific social structures, strengths, and defensive capacities of the resisters (Scott 1987: 422). Although the indigenous communities in Ethiopia, particularly the Gumuz, appear to be 'silent' about the land acquisitions, both covert and overt forms of resistance are taking place. The reasons for the resistance of the Gumuz people are not just because they have been displaced from their lands or are being threatened with displacement, but also because they feel marginalized from emerging (but limited) employment opportunities available because of the 'land investments', and because of the lack of fulfilment of other promises that such investments were purported to bring. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the Gumuz have been challenging the land acquisitions in various ways, challenging the state and social forces particularly over land and access to jobs, and around state politics.

This chapter thus uses empirical evidence in order to demonstrate the type and nature of reactions by local communities towards land acquisitions in the Benishangul-Gumuz region. By doing so, the chapter tries to show how local communities, although not organized either politically or economically, express their discontent in various ways. Information for this chapter comes from a combination of various data collection methods, which includes semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key informants, focus group discussions (FGDs), direct field observation and secondary literature review (see Chapter 2).

The following section scrutinizes the ways in which local communities have been reacting to the recent large-scale land acquisitions. As touched

upon in the second chapter of this thesis, and in spite of their long history of exposure to exploitative practices and subjugation, the Gumuz communities did not in fact fall as passive victim to 'false consciousness', dominant highlanders' ideology and the state's hegemonic representations.[5] They were able, to a certain extent, to resist the subjugation and hegemonic ideologies of the highlanders and the state in order to maintain their material as well as their cultural space. As will be discussed in what follows, the reactions of the Gumuz target those individuals and groups, including the state, that have participated and facilitated the land acquisitions in one way or another. In their reactions, the Gumuz try to make their actions and thoughts be felt by the targets, although they are very careful in maintaining the anonymity of the individuals involved. This bears a resemblance to how Kerkvliet characterized the features of everyday resistance, in which the resisters opt: "[to] the extent that the target is rather specific, those who resist imagine that their actions would not be condoned by the target" (Kerkvliet 1986: 108).

8.2 Local reactions

8.2.1 Reaction against investors

As was indicated earlier, the threat to rural livelihoods of increasing trends in land acquisitions appears to be on the rise. Although the land rights and natural resources-based livelihoods of local communities have been under pressure from encroachments by highlanders, state-sponsored resettlement schemes and state farms over the past several decades (Abbute 2002, Gebre 2003), the pressure is now increasing as more and more land resources are given out by the state to commercial agricultural investments, particularly in the last few years. This in turn is resulting in land disputes and contestations between local communities, the state and investors. Despite these contestations, because of the weak bargaining power of local communities, the interests of those who have the power to manipulate institutional and administrative frameworks are prevailing. Specifically, the Gumuz are the overlooked losers in the process.

Interviews and discussions with local individuals and groups in the study areas made it clear that there have been increased disputes over the dispossession of cultivated lands and access to water associated with land investment projects. However, the informants emphasized how powerless they are in defending their rights due to the strong politicization of the

land investment undertakings, which now also involved the federal government. The federal government was viewed as an entity against which it is impossible to dispute, something that has made the Gumuz fearful. As one Gumuz man (Guba *woreda*) concisely puts it: "We cannot wrestle with these rich investors…. we know that they have a link with and support from the government. If we wrestle with them, it is obvious that we will lose" (Interview, Ayicid *kebele*, 6 June 2012). A similar view was also found among local and regional authorities, though in a muted form, over their reduced influence in relation to land allocations.

Nevertheless, several scattered forms of resistance took place through which the Gumuz people expressed their discontent towards the ongoing land acquisitions. The local reactions targeted all of the actors involved in the land acquisitions in one way or another. One of the main actors targeted by the local communities were the investors. The local communities generally reflected negative attitudes towards investors operating in their surroundings, and several instances of covert expressions of resistance against them have occurred. Within Dangur *woreda*, for example, informants indicated that local communities sabotaged one of the investment projects that acquired land in their *kebele* (Interviews, Gimtiya *kebele*, May 2012). According to informants, a farm machinery warehouse belonging to the Jaba Agro-industry PLC was set on fire during the night by individuals who still remain unknown. The manager of the project told me that as a result of the sabotage, machinery such as tractors, threshers and spare parts as well as many other valuable goods were destroyed (Interview, Gimtiya *kebele*, 17 May 2012). He believes that this was sabotage carried out by the local community. As the warehouse was the main target, he suspects that the action was mainly orchestrated by former guards working in the warehouse who knew the whereabouts of key machinery. Because of threats of more action, the company was reluctant to make further investments, speculating that more damage might be inflicted. Actually, the manager was well aware of the risks in the area, mentioning that this was not the first incident that had happened in that specific area. He explained that the land which now belongs to Jaba Agro-industry PLC used to be farmed by another domestic company which left the area some years ago because of the attacks it had faced. The brother of the investor who used to work as the manager on the project was killed on the land by a Gumuz arrow. Soon after that, the investor stopped the project and left the area. Bows and arrows are the main traditional weapons used by the Gumuz for

self-defense and hunting. As the case above demonstrates, such sporadic and anonymous actions by local people cannot be overlooked and could in fact have the potential to have a major impact on projects.

During focus group discussions on the above arson incident, the Gumuz noted that indeed Jaba-agro Industry PLC had suffered huge losses because of it, but they preferred to be silent on the issue and they did not want to speculate on who may have been behind it (FGD, Gimtiya *kebele*, 20 May 2012). Rather, they emphasized the damage the project had caused them. They were even angry about the name of the project itself: Jaba is the name of a village in another area, though within the same *woreda*. The local communities of Gimtiya *kebele* considered this an insult and contended 'how embarrassing it is to hear the name of another place being given to our land while we have our local name'. Some of the informants among the Gumuz during individual interviews indicated that they wanted these people to leave the land as nothing good has happened since their arrival (Interview, Gimtiya *kebele*, May 2012).

Damaging field crops is another act of resistance that has been undertaken by the Gumuz people in Belojiganfoy *woreda*. In this *woreda*, for example, an estimated 700 hectares of land covered by maize ready for harvest was destroyed by fire. The investor accused the local community of deliberately causing the fire. Here again, local communities remained quiet when asked for the possible cause of the damage. Their silence cannot necessarily be taken as a sign of their ignorance. Here, it is fairly obvious that, as Scott (1985: 290) asserted, "the actor is unlikely to admit to the action itself, let alone explain what he had in mind". From an interview with an official in the regional capital, Assosa, it is clear that the regional government is aware of the hostile attitudes of local communities towards the investors, and thus speculates that the crop damage might have been one of their strategies to chase out investors from the land they were allotted by the government (Interview, Assosa, 18 April 2012).

The Gumuz were not only involved in covert forms of reaction; there were also incidents of overt actions taken against the investors. Local people took part in outright conflicts with the investors in villages that were relatively far from zonal and *woreda* towns so that government forces could not easily intervene. Disregarding the claims made by investors, several Gumuz people occupied and cultivated the land already allocated to the investment projects. This was especially the case in Yaso and Belojiganfoy *woreda,* where local people occupied the land, disregarding the investors, in

order to counteract them. In Dangur *woreda*, villagers of Gimtiya *kebele* also insisted on cultivating the land that was already cleared by investors in their villages. A key informant from Gimtiya *kebele* administration described it as follows:

> One of the investors who acquired about 3,000 hectares of land in our *kebele*, for example, tried to clear [a] large part of it. However, this investment project is actually unable to secure this whole land it is trying to develop, as some people in this village defy the land boundaries claimed by the project. In every direction, the villagers encroach upon the investor's land when the planting season comes in order to take advantage of the already cleared land. We tried to tell them in various community meetings not to encroach on the land already cleared by the investors but they just ignore us. And instead claim that the land originally belonged to them. We even tried to warn the villagers that they must stop this or they will be jailed (Interview, Gimtiya, 16 May 2012).

In interviews, one of the project managers of investment sites in the area complained that it is harder to chase these people from the land without the help of local government authorities, something which might stir even more animosity (Interview, Gublak town, 18 May 2012). He indicated that once they sow crop seeds on the field then it is unthinkable to touch it because their revenge or reaction to that would be so serious. The investors generally refrained from taking measures in such situations for fear of inflaming and provoking violent confrontations. The solution was to compromise; that is, let them cultivate unless they push further and, of course, until permanent mechanisms to force the local people to stop such acts were devised. Despite this, there were times in which investors brought in the federal police forces stationed in the nearby town of Gublak to threaten the local people from advancing further into the investment lands already cleared. The villagers, however, claimed that they were cultivating their ancestral land and rejected claims of any wrongdoing. One elderly Gumuz stated that "it is them who came to us, not us who went to them. We were here, always" (Interview, Gimtiya *kebele*, 19 May 2012).

Here it is worth emphasizing that the shift in the resistance strategies from covert to overt by the Gumuz people as described is thus related to the state's inability to exert authority over remote locations, implying that the state's presence and ability to enforce control over territory and people is the defining feature in this instance.

8.2.2 Reactions against seasonal immigrant labourers

As a strategy to undermine the land acquisitions, local communities attempt to resist the immigration of seasonal agricultural wage labourers migrating from the central highlands of the Amhara region. The investment projects almost totally depend on agricultural labourers recruited from other regions of the country, particularly neighbouring regions. Following the ongoing land acquisitions, there has been a growing influx of highland seasonal migrant labourers coming to the area for wage employment in areas such as weeding and mowing.[6]

Not only do these migrant workers work as seasonal agricultural labourers, they also introduce a new form of encroachment on the available land resources. As the jobs are mostly seasonal in nature, many of the labourers stay in the area after the completion of their contracts. They tend to encroach into the forest to acquire land so that after a year or so of cultivating it they can bring their families, and hence established new settlements.

The creation of such 'illegal' settlements has generated additional challenges for local communities, intensifying the pressure on available land resources. This has been the case mainly in Dangur and Guba *woredas*, where the *woreda* authorities now consider it to be a major challenge to the peace and security of the area, likely to fuel land conflicts (Interviews, Manbouk and Mankush towns, June 2012). The Gumuz people are well aware of this kind of encroachment on their land and its implications for them. One informant from the Agriculture Office of Dangur *woreda* illustrates that the people who encroach and establish new settlements tend to over-exploit the local land resources as their continued existence on the land is highly uncertain (Interview, Manbouk town, 29 May 2012), and that sooner or later they will be forced to leave. Due to this uncertainty, they resort to using the land and other natural resources more intensively, in contrast to the land-use practices of local Gumuz communities.[7] Notwithstanding his earlier argument, this same informant also concedes that these 'illegal settlers' hope that they might claim permanent control of the land they occupy once they have occupied and farmed it for a few years. This did not, however, seem to stop them from exploiting the resources to the greatest extent possible.

Local communities have been reacting against the influx of migrant workers, not just in order to prevent their encroachment on local land

resources but also to undermine the land investment projects by denying the investors access to labour. Several migrant agricultural workers interviewed in Gimitiya and Gublak *kebeles* within Dangur *woreda* stressed that they were 'scared' of the Gumuz people (Interview, May 2012). They emphasized that they are fearful to the extent that they felt unable to go on foot from the places where the investment projects are located to nearby towns. According to these informants (seasonal labourers), many migrant workers had been killed by the local communities while they were trying to go back to their home areas on foot. Reacting to these allegations, the Gumuz people contended that the incidents had nothing to do with them. Rather, they explained how migrant workers face challenges when they come to the area (Interview, Gimtiya *kebele*, 21 May 2012). The labourers migrate to these destinations from various areas such as Gojjam, Gondar and Siemen Shewa, and not knowing their way around is one of the challenges they face. The lowlands are covered in vast expanses of woodlands and forested areas and the migrants, unfamiliar to the area, get lost in these vast areas, unclear of the direction they need to take. Once they are lost, many do not manage to find their way out. The Gumuz complain that when something happens to these workers everybody puts the blame on them.

But migrant workers insist that they face intimidation from the local communities every day. Similar attitudes towards the Gumuz were reflected during FGDs I held in some selected villages of Tach Gayint *woreda* of the Amhara region, among the main areas of origin of seasonal labour migrants (FGDs, July 2012; see also Chapter 4). The participants stressed that threats from the Gumuz are the major risk factor that they consider when deciding whether to move to the Metekel area, with malaria and harsh climatic condition forming other risk factors. Many labourers, particularly inexperienced young workers, could not withstand the harsh daily labour and long working hours expected on the investment projects, and found the harsh climate and cultural shocks they face difficult to cope with. As a result, some decide to return back to their home areas, partly on foot in order to save some money. According to the participants, there were cases in which these people were attacked and killed by the Gumuz while they were travelling. However, it should be noted here that such allegations could also be related to the stereotypical views prevalent in the highlanders which characterize the Gumuz as hostile. Nevertheless, one local official from Dangur *woreda* administration council admitted that

there were a number of such incidents in the *woreda* but they did not know who was behind them. Whoever is to blame, and whichever group – the Gumuz or the migrants – is right, it is evident from both individual interviews and group discussions with the Gumuz that they have explicit, negative attitudes towards both the migrant workers and the investment projects.

A closer look into the issue reveals that the hostilities of the Gumuz towards the land acquisitions are not only because they face threats of dispossession and displacement from their ancestral lands, but also because they feel marginalized from the employment opportunities brought by the projects. As already pointed out, with the exception of a few guard positions, almost all the seasonal wage employment opportunities are filled by labourers from the highland areas. Since I was curious to know the reasons why the projects make use of outside labour coming from as far away as Siemen Shewa, the manager of one of the farm projects located in Gimitiya *kebele* (Dangur *woreda*) explained that they have been forced to bring labourers from other regions because of the lack of interest among the local communities to engage in seasonal labour activities (Interview, Gublak town, 18 May 2012). Implicit in his argument is the clear inference that local indigenous people are 'lazy' and have a culture that does not encourage hard work. A highlander himself, his views were no different from those hegemonic ideologies of highlanders in general that considered the Gumuz people 'as little better than animals – unintelligent, ugly, heathen and evil' (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2012: 69). In contrast to this, however, in my own interviews and discussions, most of the Gumuz expressed their interest in making use of the employment opportunities. This is what the following FGD account demonstrates:

> We wanted to work and get some money. … But these investors don't like us. They don't want to employ our people. They say this community [Gumuz] is not capable of doing daily wage work and they even went to the extent of calling our people lazy. This is their common response when we approach them for employment. They don't even see us as human beings. …. That is why they prefer to employ migrant workers. These same investors first promised that they would employ our people and that they would only employ people from other places if there were not enough workers from our communities. But this is not what is happening here. We always ask them for work. Except for a few guard positions in which our people are employed, the available job opportunities are almost all filled by migrant

> people coming from the Amhara region…..That is what we see here in connection with these investors (Gimtiya, Dangur *woreda*, 20 May 2012).

Similarly, one young Gumuz man, who once worked as a guard and for almost three months was in charge of looking after some daily labourers in an investment project located in Dangur *woreda*, expressed the view that the Gumuz people are very hardworking and that they can accomplish their tasks (such as weeding and mowing) in a very short time when given the opportunity (Interview, Gublak town, 26 May 2012).

Women in particular stressed that when they approached the investment projects for employment, they were treated suspiciously by the employers and even seen as thieves who went there not to work but to steal (Interview, Gimtiya *kebele*, 21 May 2012). Generally, the Gumuz informants stressed that this is why they wanted to make the investment projects leave. So, although the investors argued that they were forced to employ highland migrants for the available seasonal work because of the lack of local labour, which they attributed it to a lack of motivation among the Gumuz,[8] the fact that local people seeking the work were not even offered the chance or were less preferred suggests that the project leaders gave preference to highlanders. In terms of employment opportunities, therefore, the experience with existing investment projects is that they appear to have benefited highland migrants rather than the local communities, at least in the present study areas. This discussion reminds us of an earlier observation made by Tania Li (2011: 286) in Southeast Asia, in which she cogently described the situation of the local population in such a way that "their land is needed, but their labor is not".

8.2.3 Reaction against the state

Generally, the Gumuz reflected negative attitudes and hostilities not only towards investors and migrant labourers but also towards the government, which they perceived as facilitating the land acquisitions that were threatening their traditional land-use practices and the natural environment. The Gumuz contend that even before the current displacements due to land acquisitions, the state had been at the forefront of their subordination and subjugation, and that what they are now facing is nothing but the continuation of their long history of exploitation and marginalization.[9] Looking back to the establishment of state farms and state-sponsored resettlements

schemes in the 1970s and 1980s, and the introduction of private commercial farms in Metekel in the 1990s, some scholars have argued that these initiatives exemplified the central state's desire to consolidate its control over people and territory. Contesting the motive of the 1980's resettlement schemes, Gebre (2003: 54), for example, argues that

> although the resettlement was portrayed as a response to the famine [that affected the country in the 1980s], the overall decision to establish resettlement in remote locations may have been partly driven by perceived collateral advantages, such as controlling outpost regions.

In the context of the current ongoing process of land acquisitions, state categorization of land as 'unused' or 'underutilized' in order to lease it out to investors is based primarily on expected short-term economic benefits. It does not take into account the social and cultural dimensions of existing local land uses, despite the fact that these are critical for indigenous communities (Scott 1998, Borras and Franco 2010a). It is important to note that current government perceptions and discourses favour the highland plough cultivators and commercial farmers, while undervaluing the land use of the lowlander peripheral communities such as the Gumuz.[10] It was such a discourse that shaped the recent state policy of making lowland areas major sites for large-scale production of commercial crops and biofuels. As Makki (2014: 89) puts it, "instead of the alliance between smallholders and the state envisioned in the highlands, the strategic alignment in the lowlands involves a pact between the state and large-scale investors".

Land transfers to investors across the region have been undertaken by the federal government on the one hand, and regional and local government authorities on the other hand. At the federal level, increasing levels of land transfers in the region have been carried out by the Agricultural Investment Support Directorate (AISD), which was established in 2009 to identify potential investment lands in the regional states. It has been argued that this trend of land administration by the federal government is justified due to the prevailing limited capacity of the regional government to manage substantial land investments. Strikingly, information collected during fieldwork for this chapter revealed that neither local communities nor respective regional authorities have been involved in most of the land deals carried out so far by the federal government. Land transfers negotiated with the federal government were easily able to bypass legitimate rural

land administration authorities at the regional government. The regional government was simply notified about the land transfer deals carried out between the federal government and the investor.

This apparently contradicts the clearly stipulated desire by both federal and regional governments to enhance decentralized political power and decision-making in rural land administrations. Due to the inherent power asymmetries in the relationship between the regional state and the federal government, the latter have undisputed sway: local and regional authorities seem to have exerted no or very little influence over substantial land deals administered by the federal government, despite the fact that these could have considerable impact on local land use and biodiversity. While the central state has always maintained its key concern for the 'peripheral' areas in the borderlands in relation to the control of territory and people, recent decisions around land investments have direct consequences for contestations over authority between state actors at federal and regional levels. This serves to illustrate not only how contests over land and authority are played out in federal and regional state contexts, but also their salience as sites for the reproduction of the history of marginalization reflected in the pre-1991 subordinated power relations. Although the federal government may have reasserted its authority over territory and people in this way, the implications of undermining the authority of local and regional state actors over the allocation, use and regulation of land resources within their jurisdictions may become a focal point of resistance.

At the regional level, before the present regional land administration proclamation 85/2010 that provided the mandate for administering rural lands to the Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Use and Administration, land investment processes in the region involved different regional government offices. This created overlaps and ambiguities in land acquisition processes and procedures.[11] For example, although the *woreda* authorities were in charge of identifying and facilitating the land acquisition process, there were also cases in which the investors themselves identified the desired investment land and approached local authorities for approval. As these land acquisition processes appear to have lacked consistency and coordination, individuals (investors and representatives of the state acting in their own private interests) were able to manipulate them, exploiting the existing confusions and overlaps in the land administration process.

As a strategy of resistance and to undermine its legitimacy, focus group participants in Gimitiya and Qotta *kebeles* in particular, expressed their anger at the government, suggesting that they had been deceived by local officials and had their ancestral land taken out of their hands. Thus they threatened not to pay taxes, although they were aware that this would bring them into direct confrontation with the government. More than anything else, the Gumuz were highly irritated by the muteness and, at times, the role of local authorities in the land acquisitions. This is particularly so because, in contrast to previous regimes, most of the local administrative offices are now filled by people from the indigenous communities themselves. One elderly informant in Ayicid *kebele* (Guba *woreda*) expressed his sentiment by remarking:

> How come a person who is born from us lets their ancestral marks be destroyed by outsiders, or worse, by those people who enslaved our fathers and us for generations? We thought a new day has come for us in which our voices will be heard when our children assumed government positions and kids started going to school. But these local officials of ours did not stand on our side when our lands were grabbed. They deceived us instead. We don't trust them anymore, I swear! Had it not been for our fierce resistance, we would have disappeared from this area long ago (Interview, 07 June 2012).

This comment highlights how important had been their own agency in defending their territory. Indeed, during group discussions, local communities emphasized that they appealed to local authorities almost every single day. For example, the administrator of Qotta *kebele* particularly stressed that all the grievances of the community are directed at him and that he faces intimidations every day, forcing him in turn to talk to *woreda* and zonal authorities in various instances.

Almost all Gumuz informants interviewed held the view that an effort to relocate many of their villages is a strategy of the government to expropriate their land. Some people who were already relocated to new villages refused to stay and returned back to their previous villages, although in some places, for example Qotta *kebele*, their lands had already been taken by investors. Informants contended that they would not leave their current villages entirely for fear that if they did, they would lose their land and would not be able to come back again (Interview, Qotta *kebele*, May 2012). As a result, they comply with local authorities by accepting relocation to new villages as a strategy in order to avoid confrontation, but in practice

they also insist on maintaining their previous villages. This is an act of resistance without directly challenging the government's villagization programme. Other people resisted the villagization efforts outright and refused to comply with it.

Historically, the Gumuz have been able to resist pressures from the state at various conjunctures. Gonzalez-Ruibal (2012: 70) describes their resistance as follows:

> It is not only strange that the Gumuz have not vanished as a people or their numbers drastically reduced after centuries of enslaving and exploitation. It is equally surprising the degree to which their culture has resisted the pressures of dominant groups, avoiding disappearance or mixture to a large extent.

Although it seems ambiguous, at least for some scholars, to consider flight as a form of resistance, the Gumuz have been able to maintain their moral economies and cultural identities because of their continuous flight to remote areas when the forces they had to fight, including the state, were too strong. The current widespread land acquisitions that have been claiming large tracts of land from the Gumuz appear, however, to have greatly reduced the number of areas to which the Gumuz might flee. It was through flight that the Gumuz resisted and refused to live side by side with other groups in the past. And this resonates with what Adas (1986: 64) once called 'avoidance protest', referring to cases in which peasants used flight as an act of social protest and a means of defending themselves from what they perceived to be exploitative conditions. Indeed, violent forms of resistance against the ongoing land acquisitions have been rare among the Gumuz. This sharply resonates with Scott's argument based on the case of rural Malaysia in which he argued that the lack of more violent forms of resistance among the peasantry is largely "the result of a prudent, calculated, and historically tested choice favoring other strategies more attuned to [their] particular social structure, strengths, and defensive capacities" (Scott 1987: 422).

Official politics[12]

The agitations and discontents of local communities related to land acquisitions, as expressed in various forms as discussed above, appear to be shared by some local and regional officials. In contrast to earlier regimes, local political power in the region is now in the hands of officials that

belong to the indigenous ethnic groups. Some of the officials interviewed admitted their discontent over the land acquisition process, although they were very cautious in voicing opinions that would identify them as being explicitly against the system of which they are a part. For example, two regional government officials interviewed in Assosa and Gilgel Beles, who requested anonymity, expressed their concerns regarding the involvement of the federal government in the administration of investment lands in the region, with particular concerns over the processes and relations of power this implied (Interview, April 2012).[13] The officials contended that this current trend of direct federal government intervention undermines the regional government's authority to challenge and negotiate land transfers that may potentially affect local land rights, and to promote investments based on distinct regional socioeconomic and ecological contexts. For example, as the fieldwork for this particular study was underway, there was a widely circulating rumour among both experts and *woreda* and zonal authorities related to the transfer of an area which is known for its rich woodland, water and wildlife resources. This area covers large tracts of land in both Dangur and Guba *woredas* – that is, bordered by Alatish Park in Quara of the Amhara regional state, the boundary being marked by Ayima River. Local and regional authorities contended that they would resist such an acquisition by investors if the federal government actually went ahead with it.

This example indicates that local and regional authorities seem to have reacted to some of the land deals that threaten the natural environment. However, their resistance does not seem to have changed or contributed to the rethinking of policies related to the ongoing practices of land acquisitions. It is also not in the open, as most local officials do not wish to openly speak out and oppose the political system of which they are part, but choose, rather, to be silent in order to maintain their position in office. Thus, while engaged in a form of official politics (resistance) in backstage, local regional authorities have also been working alongside the federal government in the process of land acquisition despite professing that they do not support many of its aspects.

Although it seems clear that some internal dissension has been occurring among local authorities regarding land acquisitions, in practice, such tensions have not been linked to the hostilities of local communities, in order to reduce the latter's political and economic marginality. Of course, regional authorities, though they are recruited from local communities, are

in fact 'creations' of the federal government to serve its interests. As Markakis (2011: 8) argues, although there are fundamental changes in the 'social composition' of 'political space' in the peripheral regions, the trend of soliciting the collaboration of a 'subordinate elite' in the longstanding centre/periphery relationship that could help the administration of the peripheries has not changed to this day. This is further explained in the following quote:

> The imperial regime was able to secure the collaboration of traditional authorities in the conquered lands and compensated them accordingly. This class was dispossessed by the 1974 Revolution along with the entire imperial establishment, and the military rulers produced an alternative peripheral elite in the form of a 'Marxist' cadre corps to staff the state apparatus. The cadre corps in turn was ousted by the EPRDF, which then produced its own auxiliary elite in the form of a class of 'regional intellectuals' to administer the periphery. In no instance was the hegemony of the centre diminished (Markakis 2011: 11-12).

In the context of the recent large-scale land acquisitions, while the federal constitution in principle granted the regional state the authority to administer its land resources, the reality on the ground reveals that the federal government has already reasserted/recentralized its authority in administering investment lands.[14] That is why the regional authorities were unable to contest the land deals committed by the federal government, irrespective of whether the deals had adverse implications for local communities or not. In short, the 'Central rulers devolved authority and prerogative to localities, but local leaders often found that what they had been handed was an "empty envelope"' (Boone 2003: 317, quoted in Markakis 2011: 12).

8.3 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate that the Gumuz people, who are now under mounting threats from the current large-scale land acquisitions, are hostile to such acquisitions and have reacted in various ways to threats of dispossession and displacement that have already occurred or will certainly occur. Although the Gumuz seem silent, resistance is occurring. The emerging discontent of the Gumuz people, expressed in various ways, is not, however, in the form of organized and structured large-scale reactions. Likewise, the Gumuz are not supported by local authorities or

civil society organizations in defending their local land rights effectively.[15] Despite this, the overall intention of the reactions is to challenge the land acquisitions taking place on their ancestral lands. As has been demonstrated, their reactions are not only against investors and migrant seasonal agricultural labours, but also against the state, challenging its definition of 'development'. Such local reactions, that range from covert forms (such as destroying field crops and machineries, and attacking/killings) to more open forms (such as intimidation, refusal to comply with villagization, threats to not pay tax, and encroachment onto land already acquired by investors), are in fact illustrations of how the Gumuz have not been entirely helpless (though they do not often want to speak about their actions). These reactions are efforts to challenge the recent large-scale land acquisitions, not just because of their implications for possible displacement, dislocation and disruptions to local livelihoods, but also because of the absence of economic benefits from the land acquisitions both in the present and in the future. It seems unlikely, however, that the Gumuz will be able to effectively defend their land this time from the current widespread land acquisitions that involve both domestic and foreign companies with a strong connection to and support from the state. In the current context of the ongoing strong politicization of land investment undertakings involving the federal state, the disadvantages to the Gumuz and other indigenous communities stand out more clearly.

As shown in this chapter, local resistance strategies and investors' capacity to enforce their claims to land vary depending on the state's presence and level of authority. This implies that future expansion of investment (and the threat to the Gumuz) is dependent on the state's continued protection of investors. Nevertheless, the state's willingness to protect and support investors certainly depends on the latter's ability to deliver on their promises to the government in terms of actually developing the land leased, raising productivity and producing goods for export. If investors' performance is perceived as poor, it will likely affect the state's willingness to intervene on their behalf. In light of this chapter's findings, the resistance of local communities through the types of actions described is therefore a potentially important factor that will affect the economic viability of these projects.

Notes

[1] This chapter is based on Tsegaye Moreda (2015) 'Listening to their silence? The political reaction of affected communities to large-scale land acquisitions: insights from Ethiopia', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 42 (3-4): 517-539; and Tsegaye Moreda (2013) 'Postponed local concerns? Implications of land acquisitions for indigenous local communities in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, Ethiopia'. LDPI Working Paper 13.

[2] In analyzing large-scale land acquisitions, the notion of property rights is here conceived not just as 'a bundle of rights' over land but as 'a bundle of powers' that focuses on ability, and this brings attention to relationships that enable or constrain the ability to access resources (Ribot and Peluso 2003).

[3] As a counter to this 'state simplification', emphasizing the notion of 'land sovereignty' is crucial for grounding analysis from actually 'existing local land-based social relations' in order to ensure that local people are consulted appropriately and their priorities addressed in the process (Borras and Franco 2010a). What lies at the core of the 'land sovereignty' concept is "the rural poor people's right to land" (Borras and Franco 2010a: 35).

[4] There are five tiers of government administration in the country, which include (from the highest to lowest administrative unit): federal, region, zone, *woreda* and *kebele*. *Woreda* is roughly equivalent to district while *kebele*, especially in rural areas, corresponds to a group of villages.

[5] As Gramsci (1971) argued, the dominant classes normally controlled not only the material means of production but also the symbolic means of production. Through creating discourses as well as through coercion, the dominant groups try to install or solicit 'consent' for their hegemonic rule by defining what is beneficial and legitimate and, as a result, the subordinate groups accept such hegemonic ideologies and exploitations as normal and justified. Nonetheless, Scott (1976, 1977) demonstrated that peasants were capable of opposing and struggling against exploitative practices and dominant ideologies that threatened their moral economies in ways that did not conform to the assumptions articulated in Gramsci's formulation and, hence, he contended that peasants were not in fact victims of 'false consciousness'. According to Scott (1977: 280), "there can be no question of hegemony when vital needs are ignored or violated by elites, for these needs are an integral part of peasant consciousness and values".

[6] Most of these seasonal wage labourers, migrating mainly from the central highlands of the Amhara region, are landless young men or those with small landholdings who are unable to provide for their families from such holdings. For many of these labourers, seasonal migration is the only available source of income.

[7] For a detailed analysis of more or less similar cases in Metekel, see Abbute (2002).

[8] Interview with managers of two investment projects in Dangur *woreda*, May 2012.

[9] For further reading as regards to the history of centre/periphery relationships, which was characterized by a long history of inequality, exploitation and marginalization, see Ahmad 1999, Gebre 2003, Abbute 2002, Pankhurst 1977, 2001, Zewde 1991, Donham 2002, Markakis 2011 and Makki 2012.

[10] The use of land by pastoralists and shifting cultivators in the lowlands is contested by the state as such existing land uses are perceived to be unsustainable or inefficient (Lavers 2012b). This image of existing land uses in the lowlands has been very formative in the design of state policy that focuses on leasing vast tracts of land to investors in those areas.

[11] Above all, recentralizing the facilitation and administration of investment lands as observed in recent land deals in fact undermines the political process that was intended to promote and implement decentralized land administration system, as was stipulated in the regional land administration proclamation 85/2010.

[12] See Kerkvliet (2009) for a discussion of this.

[13] During the interviews, especially with one of the higher officials in the zonal capital, Gilgel Beles, before starting the interview formally, I was asked by the official not to record any of the discussions that we would have on the issue, and for that, I had to remove the batteries from my voice recorder and hand it over together with my cellphone until we finished the discussions.

[14] The Constitution of Ethiopia adopted in 1995 gives regional states the power to administer all land and other natural resources. However, recent rises in land values have seen the federal government recentralize the administration of land resources (e.g., investment lands), taking the power from regional states, in a move which is, in fact, contrary to the constitution. While the federal system has restored some of the autonomy of lowland areas in terms of self-administration, in practice, these regions have nominal authority to administer their land resources, especially when it comes to much of the potentially cultivable and valuable land that can be brought under large-scale commercial agriculture. This is particularly interesting, as the exploitation of land resources in lowland regions was perceived on a grand scale. As Markakis (2011: 260) rightly pointed out, the recent "process of leasing land touched the very core of the federal arrangement, since the main advantage of decentralization from the viewpoint of the periphery was to give its communities a measure of control over their land, and to prevent it being taken over by [the cen-

tre] as in the past". Similar remarks were also made by Lavers (2012b: 814): "Despite the creation of an ethnic federal system, which is intended to protect the rights of minority ethnic groups, recent processes of agricultural investment seem likely to continue past patterns of exploitation of the resources of minority ethnic groups for the benefit of the centre".

[15] Given the country's civil society law, enacted in 2009, that appeared to severely weaken the work of civil society organizations, particularly those of human rights defenders and advocates of democratic governance, it seems very unlikely that local indigenous communities who are threatened by the land acquisitions will be supported by such organizations in defending their local land rights against the combined weight of the state and private capital (domestic and foreign). The Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009 prohibits all foreign NGOs as well as those local NGOs that receive more than 10% of their funding from foreign sources from engaging in activities pertaining to human rights and conflict.

9 Conclusions

9.1 Introduction

This study analysed the complexity and dynamics of the land-livelihoods nexus in the context of ongoing political-ecological change and global land rush. It investigated the central research question: How and to what extent has the Ethiopian rural land-livelihoods nexus been politically contested and transformed in the contemporary era of ecological change and global land rush? As the study has demonstrated, the already difficult issue of politically contested land control and dwindling land access by the rural poor have become even more difficult a challenge. The political challenge of effecting democratic land access in this changed context especially for the younger generation and protecting the territorial rights of ethnic minorities is proving to be central. In demonstrating the dynamics of land-livelihoods nexus and changes in the objective conditions within which this nexus exists, the study has particularly explored the issues of land access, land conflicts and livelihoods in selected rural areas of the Amhara region on the one hand, and the politics and implications as well as political reactions to large-scale land acquisitions in the Benishangul-Gumuz region on the other.

In the study areas of the Amhara region, the study has explored the evolving complexity and local dynamics of access to and conflict over land. It has investigated the means through which land is accessed under the prevailing context of overall land shortages, where the available landholdings are both intensively cultivated and often insufficient for household livelihood requirements due to continuing subdivisions and land degradation. It looked at how the contemporary politics of land access shape and are shaped by social factors, political economic structures and processes, and local ecological dynamics.

In the study areas of the Benishangul-Gumuz region, the study has focused on the politics and implications of large-scale land acquisitions for indigenous local communities. It focuses on how local indigenous communities perceive ongoing large-scale land acquisitions, and how these communities have been reacting to them.

This concluding chapter provides a synthesis of the main findings, conclusions and implications of the study.

9.2 The dynamics of access to land, land conflict and land degradation

As the empirical chapters on the study areas in the Amhara region have demonstrated, although households continue to greatly depend on farming for their livelihoods, access to land has become more constrained to earn a decent livelihood from it as the current pattern of landholdings comprised predominantly small plots. As shown in chapter four, average landholdings of households in the study areas range from 0.74 hectares in Tach Gayint to 1.0 hectares in Fogera. These areas can be described as small holdings, given the fact that farming in the study areas is predominantly based on the cultivation of cereal crops. In areas where farming is predominantly cereal-based, Rahmato suggests that "an average family would, under normal circumstances, require between 2.5 to 3.5 hectare of good quality land to produce enough food to feed itself for one harvest year" (Rahmato 2009a: 49). The size of landholdings is very low in the study areas for various reasons, but two additional points should be pointed out. First, the small size of the landholdings becomes obvious when family size is taken into account. In this regard, the sampled households in Tach Gayint and Fogera are composed of 5.6 and 5.3 members, respectively. Secondly, farmlands in the study areas are characterized by low or even declining productivity. Particularly, Tach Gayint's case is intriguing because households in the area have been experiencing land degradation, including declining soil fertility, widespread soil erosion and low yields. In addition, it is a drought prone area (droughts having occurred more frequently since the 1960s), causing severe harvest failures on the already small plots.

Although the right to a piece of land has been guaranteed by Ethiopian law to any citizen living in rural areas who aspire to engage in farming, a real problem seems to occur at the local level, where land shortages have

already escalated when trying to fulfil this promise. Chapter four showed how land is currently accessed in rural areas. Rural people, particularly the young, appear to be facing increasing difficulty in gaining access to land, and those younger households who have been able to access some land tend to have much smaller holdings than households headed by relatively older people. This reflects the intergenerational inequality of landholdings. It may appear that this is the result of a Chayanovian family cycle. Younger households may still expect to take over additional land when they get older, as the now older household groups might originally had less land when they were younger. While the survey data did not allow us to trace this process of social differentiation over an individual's life cycle to see the changes, the qualitative data does demonstrate a process of social differentiation across generations in which the younger age group will continue to have smaller holdings when they enter the older age group, which implies a permanent difference. This means that the inequality in landholdings between younger households and older ones does not necessarily reflect a process of household evolution over time. Thus, the case in the Amhara study areas does not conform to Chayanov's theory of demographic differentiation in explaining inequality in landholding size. This is because access to land in the Amhara study areas is currently limited to adjust to changes to household size. For Chayanov, the availability of cultivable land was elastic. However, this assumption is questionable in the context of our study areas, as land shortages have already escalated.

This study has shown that most of the studied households gained access to land mainly through administrative-based land redistribution and inheritance practices. In the context of Amhara region's current land policy – which formally prohibits further land redistribution in most cases[1] – inheritance and gifts appear to be key sources of land access. Specifically, parents carve a portion of their land – although it is quite small – and give it to their children. The findings indicate that awareness regarding the unsustainability of these land access practices is currently widespread. This is because current plots are generally very small, hence providing very limited opportunities for further land redistribution. Given the available landholding pattern, the continuity of land inheritance practices through subdivisions – a fundamental traditional practice which enabled young people to gain access to their family land in rural areas – is not feasible. Practically, households seem to have encountered increasing difficulties in meeting

the demands of their members, as most of them tend to have a large family; sooner or later, several members will claim a portion of the land. Many of the youth who have already received very small plots from their family are finding it difficult to make a living. Under this situation, tensions often occur within a household, as the demands of each household member cannot be effectively met. The tensions and conflicts that arise are not confined within a household, but also deepen intergenerational tensions in the communities. This resonates with what Quan noted regarding the rural youth and inter-generational land relations in sub-Saharan Africa; according to him, "limitations in young people's access to land…can become highly problematic where alternative livelihoods are not available, and can trigger wider social conflicts" (Quan 2007: 57). Such conflicts over land within and between rural households, as in the case described by Peters in Malawi, "mediate an invisible, subterranean process of social differentiation and class formation. This 'hidden' dynamic is taking place through divisions between families and, particularly, within families. The quarrels and disputes have the effect of turning family members into 'strangers'" (2002: 158).

There are also important local institutional arrangements through which individuals and households gain access to land, among which sharecropping and cash rental arrangements. These institutional arrangements have served two functions. On the one hand, they enabled individuals, particularly the landless and those with very small-sized plots, to temporarily access some land in their respective localities. On the other, it enabled households that lacked necessary farming inputs (such as seeds, labour or oxen) to utilize their land by leasing it out to other farmers. That being said, despite their importance, these mechanisms seem to have become more restricted to the circle of family members and close relatives, owing to the increasing general shortage of land. This eventually leads to a situation where those people who do not have wider social and economic ties are excluded from such means of land access. The findings indicate that sharecropping and rental claims are currently mostly negotiated between parents and children. This is primarily because parents do not always give away a portion of their land to children, as own landholdings are increasingly becoming too small to provide even for themselves. Instead, parents often make the strategic decision to sharecrop their land to their children, thus enabling them to access land, while at the same time

benefiting from it themselves and maintaining control over it. Two interconnected reasons were given for the current trend of keeping sharecropping and rental arrangements almost exclusively within the family. The first relates to land scarcity, as respondents argued that restricting such local contractual arrangements would enable family members to help each other in the face of increasing demand for land. The other reason is associated with the lack of 'trust' that is developing within the community.

In addition, as illustrated in chapter four, the continued demand for land, by both men and women, in contexts of decreasing land availability has brought clear changes to the longstanding patriarchal institutions of land inheritance and allocation in the study areas. Because of the increasing land scarcity, marriage has increasingly become contingent on women having land, which in turn has brought significant changes in land inheritance relations. Moreover, it is interesting to note that women with no land have increasingly lower marriage prospects than women with land.

With the apparently decreasing availability of land and limited local employment opportunities (particularly in Tach Gayint), the rural youth and households who struggle to make a living on their 'vanishingly small plots' of land have been migrating seasonally to other areas (mainly to the northwestern lowlands). They do so in search of wage employment, in order to supplement what they can earn on their own land and in their home areas. This seasonal out-migration trend has been increasing over the last decade. For the most part it has been helping rural households to cope with the increasing land access and land shortage problems. However, in some cases, out-migration has reduced the availability of household labour, particularly for households headed by the elderly and women during peak labour requirement periods. Moreover, migrants face health-related risks and other challenges, which also seem to adversely affect households. The growing trend in seasonal labour migration, particularly in Tach Gayint, demonstrates the intergenerational process of social differentiation in which young people who could neither gain access to land nor find alternative local employment opportunities, are often forced to migrate elsewhere seasonally. Furthermore, households' strategies to diversify their livelihoods in the form of engaging in off-farm and non-farm livelihood activities cannot be simply explained by the notions of 'diversification as coping strategy' and 'diversification as accumulation strategy' (Ellis 2000), but must be seen as part of an ongoing process of rural differentiation.

Instead of engaging in the country's heated debates on state versus private land tenure policy options, or documenting the declining trends in landholding size by looking at the amount of land held by rural households at a particular time, this study's empirical chapters have extensively examined the evolving complexity and local dynamics of land access conflicts. As demonstrated in chapter five, access to land has increasingly become a source of competition and conflict in the study areas, given the households' pervasive dependence on farming. In discussing local land-related conflicts, the study indicates differences in the prevalence of land conflicts between the study areas. Land conflicts were greater in Fogera than in Tach Gayint. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, the chapter argued that the introduction and subsequent expansion of rice on the Fogera plain generated intense competition for land between and within households. The findings indicate a correlation between increases in land value and the emergence of land access conflicts. In addition to shifts in land use (from traditional crops to rice production), Fogera's closer proximity to roads and transportation to towns and its relatively greater agronomic potentials have generated increases in land values. As the farmers became aware of the increase in land value, competition over such resources increased and conflicts over their use rights emerged. These were expressed in different ways, as documented in the empirical chapters. The widespread land contestations and conflicts in the Fogera study area have not necessarily emerged due to land scarcity *per se*. They must be seen in the context of the increased values of land and the political economy of local governance, both in general terms and within the land administration system. This is an interesting and important finding, in that it goes beyond the popular assertion that land conflicts are the outcome of land scarcity. This finding helps land conflicts to be seen in relation to the political, economic, social and ecological contexts that created them.

The findings revealed a significant difference between the Fogera and Tach Gayint study areas in terms of average landholding size. There also seemed to be a greater land size inequality in Fogera as compared to Tach Gayint. In light of these variations, the significantly higher incidence of land conflicts in Fogera suggests that the conflicts are not primarily over the land shortage or scarcity, but also over its value and unequal access. In this context, chapter five analysed land tenure (in)security and the dynamics of land-related conflicts in the context of the land title registration and certification programme being implemented in the study areas at the time.

The land title registration and certification programme was thought essential for improving tenure security and reducing land conflicts. Studies conducted in other parts of the country revealed a significant reduction in land-related conflicts after land registration and certification (Holden and Tefera 2008, Holden et al. 2011). However, in our study areas, particularly in Fogera as noted earlier, land conflicts have become pervasive in recent years, despite the implementation of the land registration programme.

The quantitative data that investigated the perception of tenure security seems to illustrate the sense of tenure security in the study areas. As land-related conflicts are widespread in Fogera, it was important to undertake a closer scrutiny of the quantitative findings on the perception of land tenure security. In this regard, the qualitative study helped underpin the complexity of the issue. It showed that landholders were aware of the circumstances under which their tenure security might come under threat. Despite understanding the benefits of land certificates, including their role in reducing land border conflicts, landholders were apprehensive. They felt that such a certificate could not ease and resolve other tenure insecurity factors, especially when the state needs the land for different purposes. Firstly, concerns remained with regard to existing land laws with provisions that describe the conditions for land use rights. The fact that rights to land are partial, conditional, and come with a number of obligations (thus possibly leading to sanctions) may have certainly contributed to perceived tenure insecurity. Secondly, local government administrations (*woreda* and *kebele*) have the authority to alienate and expropriate land for various purposes. Existing land laws guarantee the right to a fair prior compensation in the case of land expropriation for a variety of public uses or private investments. However, concerns remain, particularly regarding the exercise of power by local public authorities in the appropriation of land. This power might likely be exercised by anyone with specific local power or vested interests. In cases of land expropriation, critical issues such as who determines what is in the public interest and how, are often open to different interpretations and create opportunities for elite capture. Landholders held the opinion that their land may be expropriated if the local authorities want to acquire it for various reasons, even in the presence of registered land certificates. Thirdly, and related to the previous point, land governance is another key concerning issue; land issues should not be viewed as mere technical and administrative matters which could be settled through efficient land records and titles. Rather, it also refers to

"the broader and strategic challenge of democratizing the state and society" (Borras and Franco 2010b: 23).

Democratizing local governance is critical, both because this is the level of political state structure with which rural people commonly interact, and because rural people's capacity to pursue land claims and make effective use of their land are mostly subject to local level practices. While it is essential that local authorities have decision-making powers over land matters at local levels, it seems that this has also partly provided fertile ground for various forms of abuse of power, partially related to implementing the land registration and certification process. As chapter five demonstrated, land issue problems[2] surrounding local governance (both in general terms and within the land administration system) appear to have been contributing to more conflicts over land. In the absence of a more democratically organized local land governance, local elites and vested interest groups are often able to manipulate the opportunities created through decentralized land administration systems. As demonstrated in this thesis, implementation of land registration and certification programme would fail to achieve the expected results of improving tenure security and reducing land conflicts. Instead it is likely to facilitate practices of bribing, fraudulent land certificates and land expropriations. As Toulmin (2008: 15) noted, land certification may adversely affect tenure security of the poor as "elite groups may seek to assert claims over land which was not theirs…, leaving [poor] people to find that the land they thought was theirs has been registered to someone else." It is important to understand that the most fundamental issue here is the structural embeddedness of tenure insecurity in peasant-state relations. The problem of tenure insecurity can mainly be addressed when the structural cause of insecurity – the subordination of the peasantry to the state – is addressed. Failure to democratize the state, especially local land governance, means that land registration and the institutional changes that accompany it could serve as instruments for reinforcing and enhancing the power of the state over the peasantry, and subsequently exacerbate tenure insecurity. Finally, the increasing shortage of land has been a key issue that continues to threaten tenure security, which land certificates cannot guarantee. The current growing difficulty in gaining access to land, especially for young households, is a serious concern which has resulted in increased intergenerational conflicts. In turn, this has increased land right insecurity.

In general, as shown throughout the thesis, uncertainties and insecurity still remain. This implies that tenure insecurity and land conflicts require many more measures than issuing land user certificates, as they do not address most of the apprehensions of the rural people. By situating land conflicts within the political economic, social and ecological contexts, this study demonstrated the complexity of land tenure relations, and the naïveté of expecting that land registration and certification reduce land conflicts and increase the perceived stability of land relations. Ensuring effective land governance that improves tenure security and resolves many of the conflicts that arise over land are as much political challenges as they are administrative and technical. It necessitates changes in power relationships "within society, within the state and between state and society" (Fox 2007: 335). Recognizing this is a necessary condition for making any progress in any rural development endeavours, including the effective implementation of a land registration and certification programme.

The thesis has also emphasized the importance of understanding farmers' own perceptions and interpretations of land degradation, particularly how it is viewed and managed. As shown in chapter six, land degradation was perceived (mainly by those in Tach Gayint) as one of the major challenges faced by households, along with the limited plot size. Declining soil fertility, widespread soil erosion and declining yields were perceived to reflect land degradation. One might expect that, under conditions of mounting land shortage, peasantries are extracting surpluses by over-using their land resources (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987, Bernstein 1979, Deere and de Janvry 1979), in fact the findings in this study suggest otherwise. Cognizant of both land shortage and land degradation, most households have been engaging in various land management and conservation activities within the limits set by their available resources. The chapter findings revealed that, in the study areas, tenure insecurity was not a major influencing factor on land degradation. Although the existence of tenure insecurity has been widely accepted by landholders (see chapter five), chapter six demonstrates that most households in the two Amhara study sites are making substantial investments to halt and reverse land degradation – though to quite differing degrees. In other words, the study found little evidence that the perception of tenure insecurity influenced land degradation and conservation practices. Chapter six, therefore, suggests that the focus on land tenure security may be misleading, at least in the areas studied. The findings also revealed some existing concerns that appear to

threaten landholders' tenure security (e.g., the conditional nature of land rights) that might have led to more investments in land conservation activities. This resonates Sjaastad and Bromley's (1997: 559) assertion that "investment or prudent use may be a prerequisite for tenure security."

It appears that farmers are responding to both land shortages and what they perceived as land degradation by engaging in various land conservation practices. This is mainly because they cannot abandon their land, even when it is degraded or no longer able to sustain their livelihoods. The farmers try to develop their land regardless of their tenure (in)security, in order to meet their subsistence. The growing concern among farmers was that the ability to sustain their land through intensification and land conservation efforts has been rather constrained by their limited access to economic and other resources. Blaikie (1989: 35) argued that rural land users' lack of access to resources "is one which locks them into a cycle of untreated land degradation". However, the findings of this study contradict this. Despite their limited access to economic and other resources, poor people in the study areas are undertaking substantial investments to reverse land degradation. The finding is significant in that it challenges the general assumption among scholars that landholders' prevailing sense of tenure insecurity had discouraged them from taking care of their land and from responding to the problem of land degradation. Contrary to what has been widely accepted, chapter six showed that farmers in the study area worry less about tenure (in)security and instead they have always been struggling to cope with the problem of land degradation.

As chapter six has shown, it is important to understand why farmers engage in various land conservation strategies the way they do, particularly by looking at the socio-economic, ecological and political circumstances that frame their land use and conservation. An understanding of these issues therefore allows the focus of the analysis to extend beyond that of tenure security, to emphasize the role of other non-tenurial factors.

9.3 The political economy of large-scale land acquisitions in Ethiopia

This thesis has also explored the politics and implication of large-scale land acquisitions in Ethiopia, with a particular focus on the Benishangul-Gumuz region. Land acquisitions have become ever larger over the last

few years, mainly in the lowland parts of the country. Although a confluence of diverse global factors – such as volatile food prices, increased demand for biofuels and feeds, climate change and the financialization of commodity markets – have been important drivers of recent large-scale land acquisitions across many developing countries, in Ethiopia, however, this has primarily been driven by the state. At present, the government is promoting large-scale, export-oriented agricultural investment as one major part of its overall development strategy of making Ethiopia a food-secure, middle-income country by 2025. To this end, large swathes of land have already been transferred to investors in the lowland regions.

As noted in the last two empirical chapters, a substantial amount of land has already been acquired by both domestic and foreign investors in the Benishangul-Gumuz region. As local communities are politically fractured and socially differentiated along lines of class, ethnicity, gender, generation and livelihood types (see Bernstein 2010), the land acquisitions have entailed differentiated impacts. This study has argued that the land acquisitions pose apparent threats to the economic, cultural and ecological survival of local indigenous communities. The Gumuz ethnic groups, who depend on customary forms of land access and control, and whose livelihoods are based heavily on access to natural resources, are being especially affected.

Existing contradictions in the land acquisition process generally suggest a tendency for subaltern groups – particularly the poor, marginalized and vulnerable indigenous communities – to be displaced from their land and have their livelihoods disrupted, causing land contestations. The ongoing land allocation process, largely predicated on the state's and other elite groups' perception of abundant 'unoccupied' land in the region, overlooked traditional land use practices and the social relations of local communities. This confirms the assertion that recent (trans)national land acquisitions taking place in many developing countries are not based on a consideration of "the complex and messy actually existing land-based social relations" (Borras and Franco 2010a: 34), but rather rely predominantly on state simplifications (Scott 1998). Under this misguided notion, the land from which traditional cultivators derive their livelihoods is being treated as 'underutilized' or 'unoccupied' and such lands are being transferred to investors for permanent forms of land use. The land-use changes involved the conversion of lands previously used by indigenous local communities to new types of use dedicated mainly for large-scale production

of food and agrofuels, as outlined by Borras and Franco (2012). As there are inherent differences between the different actors – who assign different meanings and values to existing local land uses – the concern should not be so much on the claim that abundant land resources exist, but rather on how this 'available' land has been identified, delineated and transferred.

Despite the substantial land transfers, genuine community consultation and participation were not part of the land acquisition process. Instead, hegemonic representations by the state prevailed as expressed in terms of powers exercised in favour of commercial land investments through the manipulation of existing institutional and administrative frameworks over the allocation of land resources, and in terms of ability to determine who gets to use land for what, how much, and on what terms, by exercising 'access control' through the 'bundle of powers' (Ribot and Peluso 2003). Undoubtedly, there would be gains for some local economic and political elites as well as the state from such acquisitions, but little gain and possibly great loss for the local communities of the region. What has now become more apparent is that the impact of land acquisitions is seldom granted much attention, and instead relies on dewy-eyed optimism.

As argued in this study, current government emphasis on the process of turning lowland regions into sites for large-scale agricultural investment has consisted of transferring the power to administer land resources (e.g., investment lands) from the regional states to the federal government. In so doing, it has enabled the central state to retain its hegemony and impose its far-reaching programmes on targeted peripheral regions. As evidenced in chapter seven, the role of local and regional state authorities in allocating land has been greatly undermined by the direct intervention of federal state elites. The increasingly direct involvement of the federal government seems to be regarded by the regional authorities with mixed feelings, in which it is partly welcomed as a contribution to expand land investments on the one hand, and a reduced authority for the regional state in decisions regarding its land resources on the other. The contestations that emerge over land resources and authority show the nature of the political (and economic) power relations that exist between the federal government and the regional states; specifically, they are redefined in some strategic areas in a federal context. In this case, it appears that the federal government did not devolve authority to the regional states in practice (as has been the case for the administration of investment lands), despite the constitutional provision that devolves power over land resources to regional states. This

question of power could in fact become the focal point of contestation among and within state actors (regional and federal). As pointed out by Lund and Boone (2013: 2), "contestation over land and resources often involves struggles not only over land *per se*, but also over the legitimate authority to define and settle land issues. Politics surrounding land institutions and land issues can be viewed as part and parcel of the processes of gathering authority over persons and resources, or state formation. Authority can be reproduced, extended and solidified in these ways". Above all, this may have adverse implications for the land rights of local communities, who are least able to defend their rights effectively against the current combined weight of the state and other elite actors. The ongoing large-scale land acquisition is thus very much the result of state policy and intra-elite dynamics. This study confirms Wolford *et al*'s (2013) assertion that "multiple and overlapping claims to authority generate a proliferation of new administrative obstacles to land deals which, on the one hand, privilege investors with considerable capital, and on the other hand exacerbate intra-community conflicts and displace small farmers and land users" (ibid.: 204).

Chapter eight examined how local indigenous communities perceive ongoing large-scale land acquisitions, and how these communities, with a particular focus on the Gumuz people, have been reacting to them. The study has argued that the apparent silence of the Gumuz people regarding the land acquisitions is misleading. As demonstrated in chapter eight, the Gumuz people, who are now under mounting threats from the current large-scale land acquisitions, are hostile to such acquisitions. They have responded in various ways to threats of dispossession and displacement that have and will continue to occur. These responses range from covert forms (destroying field crops and machineries, attacking/killings) to more open forms (intimidation, refusing to comply with villagization, threatening not to pay tax, encroaching onto land already acquired by investors). However, the emerging discontent of the Gumuz people does not manifest in organized, structured, or large-scale ways. Likewise, the Gumuz are not supported by the local authorities or civil society organizations in defending their local land rights effectively. Despite this, the purpose of their actions is to challenge the land acquisitions taking place on their ancestral lands. It is the struggle of affected communities who are being displaced and their livelihoods subverted or threatened by dispossession and displacement. As Polanyi (1944) already long ago observed, the people who

are dispossessed and displaced from the land through capitalist enclosures engage in political reactions. Chapter eight shows that the Gumuz people's reactions are not only against investors and migrant seasonal agricultural labourers, but also against the state, challenging its definition of 'development'. Such local reactions prove that the Gumuz have not been entirely helpless. They challenge the recent large-scale land acquisitions, not only because of their implications for possible displacement, dislocation, and the disruptions of their local livelihoods, but also because of the absence of economic benefits from the land acquisitions both in the present and the future. It seems unlikely, however, that the Gumuz will be able to effectively defend their land from the current widespread land acquisitions that involve both domestic and foreign companies with a strong connection to and support from the state. In the current context of the ongoing strong politicization of land investment undertakings involving the federal state, the disadvantages to the Gumuz and other indigenous communities stand out more clearly.

As shown in this study, local resistance strategies and investors' capacity to enforce their claims to land vary depending on the state's presence and level of authority. This implies that future expansion of investment (and the subsequent threats to local indigenous communities) depend on the state's continued protection of investors. If investors' performance is perceived as poor, it will likely affect the state's willingness to intervene on their behalf. In light of this study's findings, the local communities' resistance is a potentially important factor that will affect the economic viability of these investment projects.

Given the emphasis of state policies, in addition to the amount of land already transferred to investors both by the regional and federal government, such land transfers are likely to increase in the future as much land has already been earmarked for this purpose. However, a future increase in large-scale land transfers depends heavily on the ability of investors to deliver on their promises to the government in the short term – such as actually developing the leased land, raising agricultural productivity and producing goods for export. Lack of clear benefits from the agricultural investment projects accruing to the government is likely to affect the state's continued emphasis and support for such large-scale land transfers. In fact, it would seem that the government has already started rethinking such large-scale land leases, as some of the projects appear to have failed

to materialize or have not lived up to expectations. Recently, the government has terminated the land lease contract of some of the high-profile land investment projects in the country that have failed in terms of actually developing the land leased; thus, this land has been retaken by the government and put into the federal land bank. Despite this limited effort, two major measures are needed. First, the government should fundamentally rethink the policies that promote the development of large-scale mechanized monoculture. Second, it should carefully scrutinize large land investments, in order to bring local concerns aboard before the current trend, in which the short- and long-term impacts have not yet been critically considered, leads to disastrous long-term effects for the local communities and the natural environment.

As demonstrated in this thesis, politics surrounding land issues in Ethiopia vary from one context to another, particularly between highland and lowland regions. There is no single 'land' issue in the country, and the forces that shape access to land and livelihoods vary from region to region. These forces include land shortage, ecological change, commercialization and land enclosures. The current government's spatially differentiated strategy of promoting smallholder commercialization across of much of the highland regions and extensive large-scale commercial agriculture in the lowland peripheral regions will therefore result in contrasting patterns of agrarian transformations. This state strategy has differentiated political effects on state-society relations in each context. As demonstrated in the case of the Amhara study areas, gaining access to land appears highly problematic for young people, given the overall situation of land scarcity and progressive dwindling of landholding size as well as increasing commercialization of smallholder production (particularly in Fogera). These issues of decreasing access to land and existing patterns of smallholdings appear to be shaping the process of agrarian change and differentiation in these areas. Increasing commercialization across much of the Fogera plain associated with the expansion of rice cultivation as the most important crop and the expansion of small-scale irrigation for the cultivation of horticultural crops has been leading to further social differentiation from within the peasantry. In contrast, in the lowland peripheral regions, current trends of large-scale land transfers to investors would inevitably lead to a type of agrarian structure and social relations that produce the processes of accumulation ostensibly based on mechanisms of dispossession, displacement

and differentiation. In effect, these recent processes will most likely further marginalize the indigenous minority ethnic groups in these lowlands who have historically already been marginal, both politically and economically in Ethiopia's political economy. In this way, the state is facilitating the creation of a class of large landholders with economic, social and political power and influence in the country's political economy.

This second part of the study complements recent research that highlights the important roles played by host states in driving contemporary large-scale land acquisitions. In the context of many African countries, in which different authorities overlap and compete over control of land resources, the recent land acquisitions may provoke contestations and changes in power relationships within and between state and society that have important implications for land rights and livelihoods of poor rural groups, among others, women, young people, and indigenous local communities.

Notes

[1] Redistribution is not completely ruled out; currently, it requires the approval of a majority of landholders in a given locality.

[2] Such as land registration and certification processes, evidence preservation, corruption, and the handling of land conflicts.

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