



Ethiopian Women Gain Status Through Landholding

By Donna Barne

Two years ago a Gender Action Plan study found that women benefitted from land certification when the land certificate made space for two people to register joint ownership, for instance as husband and wife, instead of only one. Today a World Bank project expands the program that has given wives, widows and divorcees new rights, status and confidence.

Farmer Tewabech Mamo gazes at the lush barley field in front of her home in the Ethiopian highlands. Mist rises from a nearby stand of thriving eucalyptus trees she planted after receiving title to more than a hectare of farmland. She displays her name and photo in the green booklet affirming her land rights.

were simple, but highly effective, such as adding an extra line and photo slot to the land certificate itself, allowing for women to add their name and photo to the title.

Klaus Deininger, lead rural development economist in the World Bank's Development Economics Group, says, **"Women told us land rights were important to them, even if their traditional roles stayed the same."**

"There have been significant changes in women's roles and relationships. Previously, they couldn't own property, so that really put women in a very weak position to bargain or deal with men in society. Now that's not the case," says Zewditu Assefa, a 35-year-old mother of five who inherited her 3 hectare farm from her father after divorcing her husband.

Program Addressed Land Security Concerns

Land insecurity, present since the monarchy ruled Ethiopia, worsened among farmers when the Marxist Derg regime nationalized all land and redistributed it in the 1970s and '80s. The Ethiopia Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front took power in 1991, and has since introduced a number of policy and legal reforms aimed at improving tenure security and land management.

Prior to the land certification effort, Asagirt Woreda endured conflict—even killings—over land that drove some residents away, local land administration officials say. But those problems have largely been put to rest now that all of the district's 10,783 farming households have been certified.

Previously, women didn't have any rights to property. Divorced women could expect little more than a sack of grain

Desta Bebresadik, a widow for 15 years, can leave her land to her sons. Desta is among 2,836 female heads of household to be registered in the state of Amhara.

"It's as precious as a child like my own son," the 52-year-old mother of four sons and two daughters says of her land certificate. This certificate made me equal with the men. No one is trying to mistreat me. I have this and now I'm a proud citizen."



World Bank Photo: Donna Barne

Tewabech Mamo grows enough barley and eucalyptus in the Ethiopian highlands to support two sons, two daughters and her father. She is the head of her household and a landowner.

Mamo lives in Asagirt Woreda, a district that is considered a food-insecure area. It suffers from depleted soils, erosion and low agricultural production. The World Bank and other international organizations have supported efforts to boost agricultural productivity and livelihoods through fertilizer, other farming inputs and cash-for-work programs.

But the key to reviving agriculture in the region may be a land certification effort that has reassured farmers their land won't be taken from them without compensation, as has happened in the past.

A 2008 study funded by the World Bank's Gender Action Plan found that Ethiopia's large-scale land certification effort—covering 6.3 million households—reduced conflicts, encouraged farmers to plant trees and use their land sustainably, and improved women's economic and social status. It did so by means that at times



World Bank Photo: Donna Barne



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as a parting gift from their former husbands. Now, they are entitled to 50 percent of the property.

New Project Continues Land Certification Effort

The first phase of the government's program which issued booklets to land holders, was rapid, cheap, and unbiased, and aided by democratically elected land use committees at the local level.

Now, the second phase of land certification will involve mapping land holdings using satellite technology. A pilot of the second phase of select areas is included in the World Bank's sustainable land management project covering 35 watersheds in six regional states. The project is financed with a \$20 million grant from the International Development Association (IDA), \$9 million from the

Global Environment Facility Trust Fund, and \$8.79 million from the government of Ethiopia.

The overall goal of the project is to halt land degradation, which costs Ethiopia 2-3 percent of gross domestic product each year—a major hit in a country where agriculture accounts for nearly 50 percent of GDP, 90 percent of export revenue, and is a source of revenue for more than 85 percent of the country's 70 million people.

Farmers as a whole appear to have become more productive since the land titling program began, says Antsokia District Administrator Ato Demiss Kebede. "Because they have really started feeling confident that the property belongs to them, they have started to produce more—two to three times as much—and have installed permanent structures and other inputs to improve their land," he says. 



The most important byproduct of the program has been Women's empowerment. There are significant changes in women's roles and relationships. Previously women couldn't own economic property like land so that really put them in a very weak position in society

As Precious as a Child: Women's Land Rights in Ethiopia



Agricultural productivity and good governance are major goals of the program



The land certification program is part of a World Bank sustainable land management project covering 35 watersheds in 6 regional states



The program has benefitted both men and women. The difference for women is it's the first time in the country's history that they have the right to hold land. Female committee member Mahedere Woldeghiorgis is herself a divorcee and land-holder who leases out her land



Men are less likely to seek divorce, says Zewditu Assefa, a divorcee who inherited her property from her father

A GAP funded study that researched women's land rights in Ethiopia led to a government land-certification program that has transformed women's lives.