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Traditional Property Rights and their Influence on Forest Resource Utilisation in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Ethiopia's mountainous moist forests have witnessed high rate of deforestation during the last decades, for which scholars primarily blamed total 'open access' regimes. Nonetheless, research revealed that forest land is almost entirely divided into plots traditionally owned by local peasants. Thereby, forest use property rights determine who of a community is allowed to use which forest products to what extend. Which forest resources are thereby individually 'owned', and which ones are subject to 'open access' vary significantly. Collection of dry firewood, for example, works on a basis of 'first come, first served', whereas utilisation of timber and cash crops is mainly dominated by exclusive right ownership. Generally, the more valuable a product is, the more limited is its open access character.

Traditional forest use property rights base on informal community-based 'juridical' institutions, such as the 'elders', which guarantee persistence of use rights, serve as conflict solution bodies, and provide rules and regulations shaping utilisation of specific forest resources. These institutional arrangements allow appropriation of forest plots by patrilinear inheriting and disposal by sale. In principle, traditional forest land property rights continue to reflect distribution pattern from feudal landlord system, prevailing forest ownership and use prior the revolution in 1974.

Nevertheless, ever since revolution, Ethiopian governmental land tenure policy does not foresee individual forest ownership, as all land is designated to be 'common property of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale or to other means of exchange' (Ethiopian Constitution). This incompatibility of official governmental land policy and traditional forest property rights illegalises the latter and brings up multiple conflicts which drastically weaken forest conservation efforts.

This study provides empirical findings from two villages in the mountainous moist forests of Southern and South-western Ethiopia, and positions them into the broader framework of forest resource use and conservation policies of Ethiopia. It concludes with impulses and suggestions of how traditional forest use property rights — instead of being illegalised — may rather be incorporated into forest conservation projects.

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