



Inventory of Socio-Economic Land Data in Africa (ISELDA): The Case of Ethiopia

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A policy note

This policy note aims at examining land data management and land governance in Ethiopia. It outlines critical issues that were reflected in the land data inventory and data improvement strategy. The nationalization of land which involved transfer of land from a few landlords (who monopolized land ownership) to the state property while redistributing land to all farmers took place in 1975 under the governance of the socialist regime. The current government maintained the policy but introduced agricultural development-led industrialization as a development strategy of Ethiopia to guide the agricultural transformation and

investment decisions. The country adopted the strategy due to the fact that there is a forward and backward linkage between agriculture and industry. Nevertheless, it seems that the Growth and Transformation Plan of the country has given limited attention to agriculture where the government allocated only 14.5 billion birr (3.7% of its national budget) for agriculture in its 2019/20 budget year (CEPHEUS Research and Analytics, 2019:7).

The land policy of the country provides access and use rights to land by smallholder farmers without permitting full ownership as the land belongs to the government. While tenure insecurity remains central to the rural agricultural land in Ethiopia, provision of holding certificate has been considered as a compensatory measure for this to induce confidence among smallholder farmers. These farmers experienced a slight improvement in tenure security where added features, such as land lease and crop-sharing arrangements have been formalized. The reform is expected to enhance land productivity by encouraging farmers to invest in sustainable land management. Keeping land under the control of the state and supply of other agricultural inputs has been serving as a means to ensure control over farmers where the governing party used land as political asset. Consequently, such an action has constrained land transfer from less to more efficient users.

Moreover, the central problem in the land governance is the issue of land possession, acquisition and dispossession in the process of urban expansion or large-scale investment as they remain often controversial. It has been central to political instability and subsequent political reform in the country in 2018. One of the reasons for this is inadequate compensation paid to farmers when land is taken away for public investment or any other purposes putting the livelihoods of farmers close to cities at risk (Lindner, 2014; Hailu, 2016). This reveals that smallholder farmers in Ethiopia were used to receive limited legal protection from the government despite the provision of landholding certificate meant to improve tenure security. The land data collection and documentation strategies should also consider the relevance of this information. A series of failures were recorded in remote places of the country where land was acquired for large-scale agricultural investment through taking loans from the Ethiopian Development Bank, the source of failure being limited monitoring of investment processes mainly due to absence of land data. There was a lot of corruption and other institutional weaknesses experienced in the acquisition of land and loan. The current government is determined to collect the loan, improve land governance in the country and vowed to bring corrupt individuals to justice.

At the center of all these problems is the limited capacity to introduce appropriate land use policy and land governance. Poorly organized data, fragmented nature of information on land and politicization of land administration are obstacles to land policy reform. Socioeconomic changes such as surging unemployment, population pressure and reduced land productivity due to climate change added further pressure

on rural land where disputes remain so frequent. Along this, Lavers (2012) state that the relationship among rapid population growth, land shortages and increased dependence on food aid is compelling to accept that existing land policies are socially and politically unsustainable.

The other aspect is that Ethiopia has the largest pastoral population in eastern Africa although the existing land data collection excludes pastoral system of land use. Such a gap in socio-economic land data from the pastoral system will generate a negative impact on land governance and policy development. The absence of pastoral land use data including customary land use and institutions, loss of communal land for large-scale investment through expropriation (often without compensation), expansion of private enclosure resulting in disappearance of options to manage environmental risk, and the relationship between formal and customary land resource governance can pose tremendous challenges to the development of land use policy (Beyene et al., 2020). Effective land governance cannot be established without having detailed and inclusive socio-economic land data. The land data inventory and improvement strategy identified lead to the conclusion that policies that improve land governance require the collection, organization and integration of land data by creating a centrally digitized land data management system, which connects different stakeholders working on land. This is instrumental in enhancing decision-making for the rural and urban land administration. The national action plan in land administration should support generation of socio-economic land data on:

- possible sources of property rights insecurity to land which are central to protect ordinary citizens against all forms of expropriation related to land;
- mechanisms of monitoring land used for large-scale investment to support efficient use of land and prevent rent-seeking behavior related to land acquisition and transfer; and
- welfare impacts of land use certification (enabling smallholder farmers engage in land lease and crop-sharing arrangements) which can in turn serve as indicators of good land governance, without undermining communal land holding systems among pastoral communities.

Another important challenge is that the existing land data sharing policies and strategies are blurred, failing to support the free exchange of data for the purpose of national development. Different stakeholders approached during the visits while taking inventory of socio-economic land data were either not willing or mandated to provide data. This requires the Ethiopian government to develop land data sharing and management policy if it intends to support agricultural growth and achieve sustainable development goals. Establishing land policy forum can be an important step where issues related to land are presented and discussed at certain regular

interval, which could be coordinated by the land use and administration directorate in the Ministry of Agriculture in cooperation with relevant institutions. Research and academic institutions will share their key findings and set agenda for dialogue on land issues in Ethiopia. Thus, the land policy forum will be a key source of evidence that can assist the government to update its land policy or at least respond to some of the inherent challenges in land governance.

Lastly, investment plans for the purpose of job creation and transformation of agriculture from subsistence towards commercialization require overcoming the limitations identified during the assessment: absence of accurate land data, poor recording system and manipulation of land data, absence of integration of socio-economic and geospatial data and limited geographical coverage in the land data collection. Land administration reforms in land data management, communication and integration of efforts by different land related stakeholders identified during the assessment are central to improve land governance in Ethiopia. Initiatives that support the land sector of the country should give attention to building the capacity of the staff in the relevant ministries and agencies on how to collect and manage land data in a way such data could be shared across other sectors of the economy as need arises.

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