
INTENSIFICATION OF AGRICULTURE AND THE BATTLE FOR LAND IN THE ANGAR-DIDESSA VALLEY, WESTERN ETHIOPIA, 1991-2010.

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ABSTRACT

Following the disintegration of state farms in the early 1990s, the Angar-Didessa Valley became the center of the contest for arable land. This article tries to examine the dispute over arable land in the valley from 1991-2010. The study employed a historical research method in which evidence on access to land, land use, farmers' relations, investment, etc. have been employed. The study argues that ill land acquisition, land use, and ill land governance have contributed to conflict among local society, subsistence, and large-scale farmers, which seriously affected the environment, social security as well as development in the region. It reveals that instead of being a productive source of food as well as cash crops, the valley turned into a conflict area in which the local societies, commercial and subsistence farmers were the major actors as well as victims. Because the conflict was ethnically framed, it affected productivity, production relations, the environment as well as development endeavors in western Ethiopia. In particular, while the conflict denied the right of the local society to access the valley resources, it created insecurity for small and large-scale farmers to cultivate which in turn negatively affected the economy and social relations.

KEY TERMS: Agriculture; Intensification; Land; Land dispute; Valley.

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, access to resources has been the root of violent conflict in western Ethiopia. Recently, such contests for land were exacerbated by the increase in the number of farmers, ill land governance, and presumed ethnic identification to access land. Contests to access agricultural land have often been transformed into open conflicts among farmers involving other actors. This manuscript relates to conflict in the Angar-Didessa Valley to the intensification of agriculture and ill land governance. The purpose is to show how these factors affected the right to access land, social security, and development in the region. It first describes the natural environment of the region, and the establishment of state and settlement farms, and finally explains how small and large-scale farmers were engaged in conflict to secure agricultural land. It describes how ethnically framed land conflict endangered the existing cooperation among farmers, sustainable agriculture, and livelihood in the region.

The Angar-Didessa Valley is a massive land mass following the two big rivers, the Angar and Didessa in western Ethiopia. The valley is located between 36° 02' and 36° 46' East longitude, and between 7° 43' and 8° 13' North latitude. It constitutes an area of nearly 27,530 km² (Melese, 2011). The valley's river systems comprise two large river systems, the Dhidhessa and the Angar consisting of their various tributaries. Of the total 2,313 identified feeder rivers that make up the valley drainage, more than 29 tributaries supply a full-sized volume of water except for a few months of the dry season (Tesfaye and Wondimu, 2013). The valley extends to the Blue Nile valley in the north and the Dabus River in the west. The Nilotes such as the Gumuz, Berta, Ma'o, Komo and the Gabato sparsely inhabited the valley territory in the western parts. The Mecha Oromo inhabited the adjacent highland areas of the valley in the southern, northern, and eastern parts and for long established a strong regime over the valley (ABA, 2013). The study area exhibits a humid tropical climate and receives high rainfall ranging from 1,509 mm. to 2,322 mm (Mekonon, 2013). The annual temperature ranges from 21°C to 36°C (Huffnagel, 1961). For much of its history, the valley had been forest ecology in the land use category of the Oromo and hunting and gathering space for the Nilotes. The local people, namely the Oromo and the Nilotes degrees of access to resources at various times for food gathering, hunting, extraction of animal products, and grazing (Hinew, 2018). While the Nilotes entirely depended on hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation in the valley, the local Oromo utilized the valley as a resource appendage to supplement their living and agriculture (Iffa, 2001). Shifting cultivators used to produce cotton, finger millet, sorghum, pepper, peanuts, cardamom, sesame, and various oilseeds (James, 1996). The valley was also a center for seasonal grazing, known as daraba (transhumance). Oromo herders from the adjacent highlands also seasonally drove their cattle for grazing and salt licks. Tradition indicates that the mineral content of the salt lick served as medication for intestinal parasites because of which cattle's immunity to disease and appetite to graze increased (Ambachew et al, 1957). It is noticeable that these land use and modes of livelihood systems had integrated the local communities and people across ecologies in the region. The case in point was the interdependence between the Nilotes and the local Oromo. The process led to the establishment of a historical bond, which for long maintained balanced socio-economic relations among the peoples. In their land use system, the valley was an integral part of their environment in which the right to valley resources was communal, and theoretically, all members of society had equal usufruct and responsibility to manage it (Hinew, 2018). The rationale for this study arises from the recent ethnically framed wider conflict and displacement in the region south of the River Abay and the Angar Valley in particular. These include 2004, 2008, 2011, and the recent conflicts involving ethnic Oromo, Gumuz, and Amhara farmers. It attempts to answer the question of what caused farmers' conflict in

Angar-Didessa Valley. Such serious problems urged me to assume that the sources of the wider ethnically framed conflict in the valley have to do with the intensification of agriculture and the contest for land. I assume that examining the nature of land acquisition, land governance, and inter-farmer relations can help to explain the cause of the conflicts. The article looks into how farmers' intrusion into the valley and the absence of a well-organized land governance system created disputes among farmers and negatively affected agricultural production, the environment, and social relations as well. The study also attempted to link the recent regional conflict to the issues related to access and control of agricultural land in the extensive river valleys in the Wallagga region.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study benefited from oral evidence, archives, and secondary literature. Data was collected through interviews with key informants, and a review of written sources, including public records on state farms, resettlement, and land leases. Initially, empirical data was collected on development projects, land use, and land acquisition systems since the early 1970s. Secondly, oral evidence on landholding systems and production relations was collected from farmers as well as local societies. My field assistants introduced me to informants. To obtain information on age-old land use, farmers' interactions, and change and continuity in these aspects, elderly informants were purposely selected. Besides, younger informants were interviewed to know their feelings and perceptions about their land use and level of engagement in a resource conflict.

During the interviews, I recognized that informants had a lot to say about their access to land, changing land use systems, and relations between farmers and environmental resources. In 2017, the researcher gathered data on the state farms and state-sponsored population resettlements in the valley to understand the socio-economic settings of the area. Likewise, archives of various periods on agriculture in various government sections and in the hands of individuals were significant sources of insights on the topic. Putting these sources together gives the full picture of the dynamics in land use, systems of production, and inter-farmers' relations in the period. To examine agriculture as an economic and social process, this study linked inter-farmers' relations to the wider context of the social, economic, or environmental factors of Ethiopia in general and western Ethiopia in particular.

It is essential to comprehend the concept of conflict before relating the intensification of agriculture to conflict. Scholars such as Bernard Mayer (2012) explain the conflict in three dimensions, including conflict perception, feeling, and action. As a perception, Mayer defines conflict as the conviction that 'one's own needs, interests, wants, or values are incompatible with someone else's. As a feeling, Mayer describes conflict as emotions including 'fear, anger, bitterness, sadness, hopelessness' or the combination of these. Finally, Mayer indicates that conflict entails actions, which may be 'violent or destructive.' Moreover, to the ECOWAS, conflict is 'contradictions inherent in power relations and which manifest themselves in individual and group interactions with one another and with nature in the pursuit of limited resources or opportunities. For this study, conflict could be understood as a violent expression of disagreements, frustration, and physical attacks frequently arising from unsatisfied needs and aspirations.

Conflict over arable land in Ethiopia in the late 20th and the early 21st century should be understood from the domestic and international economic and political contexts of the period. The domestic ones relate to pertinent identity, political, economic, and social issues that were

in one way or another linked to the land. Since the late 19th century, the imperial system installed a repressive and exploitative system that limited farmers' access to land, particularly in the southern section of the country. Although the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution made significant changes, the past deep-rooted disputes among the peoples on resources, territorial claims, and power served as fertile ground for political allegiances as well as resource conflict. The post-1991 ethnic and language-based federal administrative arrangement also promised to solve the long-lasting economic and social injustice. However, ethnic politics triggered disputes over resources, including agricultural fields, mining areas, and ownership of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). In addition, conflict in the region cannot be understood without the regional political context and the roles of regional actors. While Ethiopian leaders borrowed ideologies of development from abroad, the persistent intervention of international and regional actors in the affairs of the country to satisfy their national interests inevitably aggravated civil conflicts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the post-1991 period, several underlying demographic, economic, political, and environmental factors contributed to the intensification of cultivation and aggravated resource conflict in the valley (Hinew, 2018). First, in its economic policy, the new government promoted both commercial and smallholder agriculture, which contributed to the rapid expansion of valley cultivation. The incentive given by the government for such ventures on formerly state-owned farms and large areas of virgin land, as well as the high value obtained from the lowland crops such as sesame, haricot, cotton, and grains, encouraged commercial farmers. Secondly, the recent reduction of deadly lowland diseases that made crop-livestock production possible attracted farmers from far and near. Following the closure of the state farms, the government invited farmer investors and leased land to hundreds of such commercial farmers. Large-scale commercial farmers were private capitalists who exploited land for commercial production by utilizing modern agricultural machines and inputs. They were supported by producing grain, pulses oilseeds, and other cash crops. In addition to what the government resettled, several self-organized farmers occupied land as smallholder farmers. Smallholder cultivators included old and new settlers who were engaged in subsistence farming.

The cumulative effects of all these changes produced many big and small farmers who became the major actors in the valley's agriculture and social relations. The agricultural expansion and resource relations in the valley can be used as a case study to evaluate the trends of human-to-human relations in the period. Unregulated land acquisition, unbalanced land use systems, and resource depletion brought about complex social relations.

Land Lease to Investors, Land Grabs, and Governance

Agricultural intensification and the subsequent battle for land in the period were the cumulative results of the extensive land lease to investors and self-organized and government-backed settlements. The land was obtained through formal lease and contractual arrangements between landholders and cultivators, and grabbing. By the end of 2010, the land area cultivated by commercial and smallholder farmers was threefold the land area the state farms used to cultivate in the late 1980s (Hinew, 2018).

In post-1991, the privatization of agriculture created several commercial farmers (*Negarit Gazeta* 15/1992). The State Farm Enterprise transferred to Oromia National Regional State about 46,521 hectares of land for lease. By 2010, the government had leased out nearly

70,000 hectares of land to more than 167 investors (Hinew, 2018). In addition, 271,000 hectares of land had been leased to approximately 220 investors, and 390,000 ha was allocated for agro-forestry in the territory of the valley administered under the Beni-Shangul Gumuz region (Beni-Shangul-Gumuz, 2004 EC).

Table 1: Land occupied by big farmers (1998-2010)

No.	Region	Type of land occupation		Land size in (ha)
		No. of farmers	Types of land acquisition	
1	Oromia	167	Large-scale farming	70,000
2	BGRS	220	Investors	271,000
			Agro-forestry	390,000
	Total	387		341,000

Compiled from East Wallagga and BGRS Investment Bureaus

The area of land leased to investors ranged from 11 to 15,800 hectares and the rental of a hectare of land ranged between 98-135 birr based on the location of land in terms of accessibility (Interview, 2021). The lease period ranged from 25-50 years (Rahamato, 2011).

The battle for land in the valley became intense when big farmers sized land without measurement and when smallholder farmers were involved in land grabbing. One former state farm officer narrated:

Beginning from the collapse of the state farm in the early 1990s, several farmers from far and near were engaged in occupying the formerly state cultivated and virgin land through lease and grabbing in the valley. The state neither has precise information on the size of land it leased out to investors nor delimited between formerly cultivated and uncultivated land. It did not also have land use plan and protect the valley land from grabbing (Interview, 2022).

Besides, the restricted roles of the local governments and the absence of land lease procedures exacerbated land grabbing. For instance, until late 2002, local governments were not authorized to execute such activities and monitor agricultural investment (EWARO, "Ye Meret Rikikib", 1994EC). Even then, local governors in most cases leased out land whose area they did not identify and barely administered. One problem observed in the process of land leasing was that private investors concluded lease agreements without having information on the area of the land they leased. Until 2010, both regional governments could not conduct a comprehensive land audit and, as a result, the area of land owned by private investors was not exactly known (Oromia Agricultural, 2000 E.C). Hence, the majority of private investors did not own a site plan of the land. Such problems were the major causes of conflict between big farmers among themselves and smallholder farmers. These loopholes created opportunities for corruption. Evidence shows that in most cases many investors claimed the same plot of land, which resulted from a corruption of land lease committees. Boundaries between plots and uncultivated land were least delimited, which also gave rise to land grabs and conflict (Ibid). As a result, beginning in the mid-2000s, uncultivated land in the valley was occupied by either licensed investors or smallholder farmers (Interview, 2021). According to the land audit report of Oromia National Regional State, almost all private investors had leased land that illegally controlled a larger area of land than the actual size they leased or occupied uncultivated land close to the land they leased. Many local people were involved in various contractual agreements, including renting land that they did not own

legally. In addition to the officially leased out 70,000 hectares, it was identified that in the eastern parts of the valley alone, private investors unofficially cultivated nearly 26,000 hectares of land (Oromia Agricultural, 2000EC). In the majority of the areas indicated, the type of land illegally occupied by the big farmers was uncultivated land that the state farms formerly planned to either cultivate or keep for conservation purposes. Among these were forest lands, bushland, savanna, wetlands, and riverine areas and parks. Such areas experienced a higher scale of land grabs by big farmers and deforestation (Interview, 2021).

The consequences of such land acquisition were far-reaching. While land leases in the state-cultivated areas brought a social crisis, pushing small-scale farmers to uncultivated land, land grabs in the virgin land were the major causes of deforestation of the remaining forest. An ex-state farm employee recounted:

After the agricultural enterprises stopped paying salaries to its workers, many unskilled workers established their farms on portions of the state farms and in the areas close to the state farms. When the government leased out the land, they demanded to be given land on the state-cultivated plots or to be certified holders on the plots they held. The situation became deadlock and led to conflict when investors claimed land including what workers of the state farms had developed and the government urged them to leave the land (Interview, 2022).

The FDRE government strongly asserted that land would not be given to investors if it denied the rights of farmers (Negarit Gazeta, 1994). However, oral evidence revealed that land transfers to investors caused land alienation (EWARO, 1992EC). For instance, in Sasiga District, three investors who had informally occupied over 279 hectares of land came into conflict with 335 ex-state farm workers that camped in four villages. Likewise, in Diga, it was identified that investors came into dispute with 274 households (six villages) of former workers of the state farms who had established their farms on about 148 hectares (Oromia Rural Development, 2004EC). In addition, the forceful eviction of ex-state farm workers caused conflicts and retreat to uncultivated land. Ex-state farm workers lamented that the new government alienated them from the land they had developed under dreadful conditions in favor of a few 'ghost-investors'. They felt deprived and disempowered that their response was violent including looting, and burning the properties of investors (EWARO, 1995).

Land grabs by smallholder farmers

Ever since the rumor of the closure of the state farms was heard, apparently in 1992, the valley has witnessed an increase in the number of smallholder cultivators who sought to get land. Several smallholder farmers occupied land unofficially through land grabs. The forerunners of such farmers included former state farm workers and self-organized settlers from the adjacent highland areas and northern Ethiopia. The possibility of access to fertile land through acquisition, access to land through sharecropping agreement, and at least an opportunity for employment in large-scale farming attracted farmers to the valley. They also exploited the weak valley administration as an opportunity to occupy formerly state-cultivated and virgin areas asserting that the land was their ancestors' possession as places of old beekeeping, grazing, and salt lick holdings before the Darg deprived them of the right of access to the resources (Interview, 2021).

From the mid-1990s onwards, the valley also witnessed the most persistent move to acquire land by self-initiated farmers from the region north of the Abay River. Regardless of the

regionalization policy of the EPRDF government that restricted migration and resettlement in other regions, the region witnessed enormous spontaneous migration and settlement by Amharic-speaking people. Many farmers came as daily laborers or sharecroppers to work on the holdings of the local people. Having become acquainted with the local setting, such farmers soon seized land in the open forest without any limitation that caused land disputes (Tefera, 2009). The news of their success as well as the easy access to land with fewer local challenges further attracted farmers from the same areas. Weak local reactions enabled massive numbers of Gojjame and Gondar farmers to settle and establish farms in the valley land. From the mid-2000s on, farmers from similar places were able to penetrate deep into lower Didessa and establish farms in deep parts of the valley (Interview, 2022).

Table 2: Land occupied by smallholder farmers (1998-2010)

No.	Region	Type of land occupation		Land size in (ha)
		No. of farmers	Types of land acquisition	
1	Oromia	No figure	Smallholder farming	140,000
2	BGRS	No figure	Small holder farming	25,100
	Total			165,100

Compiled from East Wallagga and BGRS Investment Bureaus

The highest number of self-organized smallholder farmers who such destinations established new villages at Mukarma, Same Goda, Shakisa, Hora Wakale, Walmara, Tullu-Micire, Dagala Lenca, Angar-Dale, and Mucuco (Tefera, 2009). Such land seekers were often armed and organized themselves into groups to acquire land and for protection. The conditions often made it difficult for local authorities to stop immigration and valley settlement. They were able to occupy extensive forest land and illegally converted to homesteads and cropland and renamed them. The method of settlement involved the establishment of churches in the forest areas and was then followed by the establishment of residences. Such centers served as core areas of dissemination of farmers to seize land (Interview, 2021). Overall, in the period under study, there was a strong move to obtain land in the valley by smallholder farmers.

Government-backed settler farmers (2003/4)

In addition to the above self-organized settlements, Oromia Regional Government resettled thousands of Oromo households from Hararghe and Arsi regions in 2003/2004. The settlement was driven by food security concerns. In the resettlement program, the Oromia Regional State established about 19 resettlement centers in the valley to resettle, 21,126 households or 52,888 families in eight districts of the valley territories. The resettlement consumed about 30,057 hectares of uncultivated land for homesteads and farmland (East Wallagga Zonal Food Security, 2008). The program brought a large number of potential cultivators to the region, which triggered a massive population influx and competition over land for agriculture. It opened a new east-west population movement to the region in addition to the preexisting north-south trend of population movement that had already increased the number of valley farmers.

Links of Conflict with Land

The intensification of agriculture altered traditional productive relations by limiting access to land. The major negative consequences of this change were disputes over land and the deterioration of resources that the local people used to depend on. The arrival of farmer investors and large smallholder farmers disrupted the previous use of land, processes, and

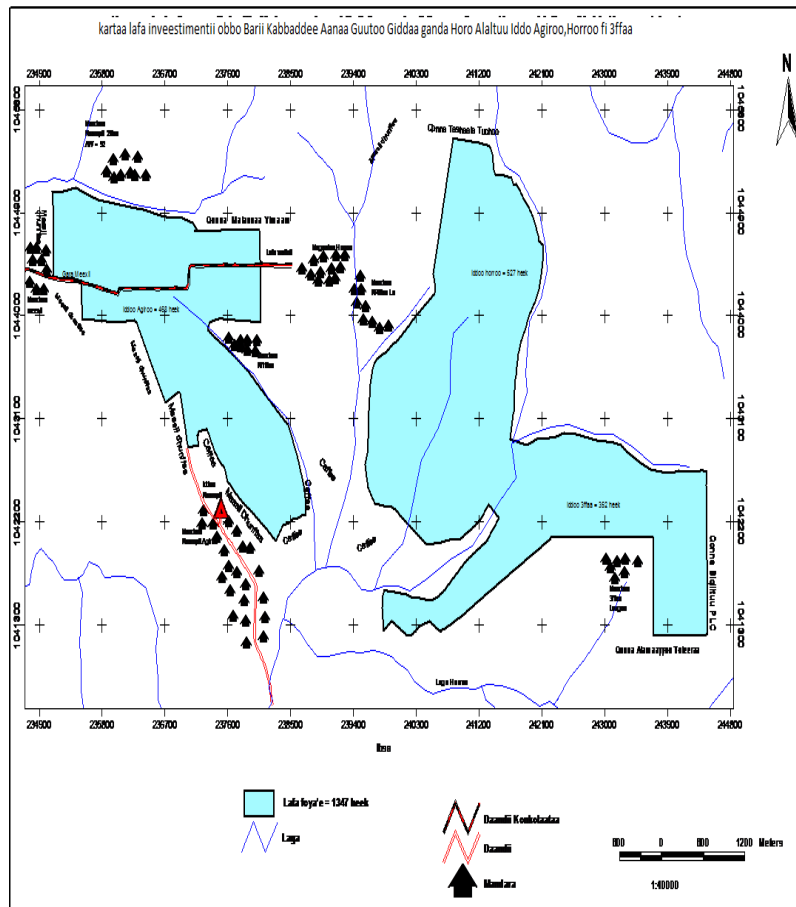
terms of land acquisition and access to land. The land question was often politicized, leading to conflict. An elder among the local community explained:

Following the closer of the state farm, overlapping claims among competing actors caused violent conflict. The state demanded to promote private large-scale commercial and regulated smallholder farming. Whereas the local community including the Oromo and the Nilotes who were custodians of the valley resources hoped that the closure of the state farm meant they would at least secure some of their old grazing land, salt lick, hunting and honey gathering fields. Instead, the process invited several self-organized small-scale cultivators, which totally alienated the local societies from the valley resources. Based on these criteria farmers marked each other's social status as pioneer vs. newcomer, native vs. alien, host vs. guest (Interview, 2022).

Disputes over land in the period largely occurred between the local societies (the Gumuz vs. the Oromo) on the benefit and ownership of land and between the local societies and guest farmers. While land dispossession created grievances among the local communities, the perception farmers developed towards one another was mainly based on seniority in the area and this determined the whole setting of their interaction on land deals.

Local community-investor relationship was more often conflict than cooperation. Some factors brought the local people into conflict with investors. Local people, particularly the Nilo-Saharans, did not benefit from jobs created by the existing investments largely due to the alleged lack of appropriate skills and the unfair payment arrangements by investors (Beni-Shangul-Gumuz Region, 2004). Conversely, investors were reluctant to employ the local people for fear that resentment of the local people against investors might cause employees to burn crops and damage machines. Investors employed labor from outside, mainly the Gojjame whom they considered 'better and faster' at clearing land. Local people indicated that investors paid lower wages for the task of clearing land, which did not attract them to engage in it. Besides, investors restricted the local people's access to grazing land, and water and used big trees for beekeeping (Interview, 2021). Tensions between the local community and investors were severe until the late 2000s when the local government intervened and began to give remedial solutions. Notably, the tension between the big and small farmers was one of the underlying problems disrupting agriculture. To ease the tension, the local government contributed to the legitimization of investment, apportioned land, and relocated the local people. In this process, workers of the state farms were relocated to several villages such as Hora-Wata, Madda-Jalala, Qarsa-Mojo, Balo-Central, Angar-Central, Bacibaca, Jirma, etc (Oromia Agricultural, 2008).

Figure 1: Villagization of local people vis a vis Private Farms



Source: Investment Bureau of East Wallagga Administrative Zone

Similarly, in Balo-Jegonfoy and Kamashi districts the regional government regrouped the scattered communities into centralized villages in late 2010. For this purpose, Peasant Associations were established in Kamashi (14) and Balo-Jegonfoy (10). A Gumuz elder lamented:

Initially the government agents told us that villagization of the Gumuz people was to promote their well-being through providing social services and improving their cultivation system. Besides, the plan had no direct link land investment and would not cause land eviction. Nevertheless, the loss of land to farmer investors and the restriction of people's previous system of livelihood justified that the very purpose of villagization was to make free space for investors at the expense of the local people (Interview, 2021).

Evidence from recurrent land disputes and Non-Governmental Organizations that intervened to reduce internal displacement and poverty are indications that relocation had a direct link with large-scale land acquisitions (UNICEF, 2000).

The land dispute between the Gumuz and the Oromo was reinforced by an irredentist ideology that aimed at the return of the territories, which the Oromo had lost to their Gumuz neighbors during the 1994 federal boundary arrangement and the Gumuz demand to control the entire lowland territory. Informants attributed the major factor for the 2004 and 2007/8

Gumuz-Oromo conflict to the need to get land and secure big benefits from valley cultivation (Interview, 2021). It was the outcome of the wave of large-scale land acquisitions that began during the federal boundary arrangement. The regional states were delimited based on "the settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the peoples concerned." (FDRE, 1995). However, it is clear that in the boundary arrangement, many Oromo-inhabited areas of the valley were included in BGRS, and some Gumuz people of the lower Dhidhessa were included in the Oromia Zones of West and East Wallagga. Since then there have been repeated claims to restore the territories to their respective regional states. The Gumuz over-ambitiously claimed all the lowlands to be included in their territory. The Oromo did not acknowledge this Gumuz idea of boundary definition; instead, they maintained that many areas of Balo-Jegonfoy, Matakka, Yaso, Agalo-Mexi and Kamashi districts used to be Oromo land in which the powerful Oromo chiefs had historically resettled the Nilo-Saharan for their socio-economic gains and as a result, these areas were included into the BGRS in the boundary arrangement. According to elders, the Gumuz settlement of the western parts of the valley was a history of a hundred years and indicated that the entire valley land east of the Dabus River was part of the Maccaa land that the Leeqaa-Monarchy governed from 1840. Among others, the Gumuz-Oromo conflict of 2004 is said to have been instigated by the motive of the Gumuz to control particular areas including Badesa-Gamada, Fix-baqo, Baredu north of the Angar River and Balo-Central, Balo-Bareda, and Tolee areas of the valley. The then President of the region indicated the dispute between the peoples of the two regions and requested the intervention of the federal government to resolve the conflict on agricultural land, land grabs, illegal timber trade, and gun smuggling in the contested areas (EWARO, 1995 E.C.).

The evidence presented by BGRS to claim the land was the dislocation of Nilo-Saharan during the establishment of state farms and state-sponsored settlements in the 1970s and 1980s and such areas were wrongly included in the Oromia region during the boundary arrangement. The correspondence claimed that Oromia Regional State had carried out leasing out land to investors and carried out large-scale resettlement in contested areas (James, 2014). This specifically referred to the resettlement of 4132 Oromo households from Hararghe on 8243.5 hectares of land. Local authorities of BGRS viewed this as an occupation of land by the Oromia region and an attempt to make incursions into the fertile lands of the Balo-Jegonfoy district (EWARO, 1995 E.C.). However, officials from the Oromo side refuted these complaints as groundless and underlined that the Oromia region had resettled farmers in the areas that historically belonged to the Leqa Oromo (EWARO, 1996 E.C.). In April 2004, an organized Gumuz militia attacked Oromo villages in the areas presumed to be contested areas including churches and resettlement centers. The conflict claimed hundreds of lives and was only stopped with the intervention of the federal government and a promise of boundary negotiation. Although the regional governments of the two regions several times agreed to negotiate, the land dispute remained unresolved and became the major factor for the more pervasive 2007/8 conflict (EWARO, 1998 E.C.).

Conflict in the contested areas flared up from May 2007 to May 2008, when groups of armed Gumuz militia forcefully displaced the Oromo and settled the Gumuz people in Sholo Chargogo kebeles in Diga and at Hora Wata, mender 4, 5, and 8 in Sassiga district (Fekadu, 2010). The Gumuz's access to firearms in the west from the Sudan border strengthened their power and was the source of unbalanced relations. Oromo elders explained that Gumuz officials and elites spurred the territorial dispute by propagating the mistaken view that all the bamboo-growing lowland territories naturally belonged to them. The Oromo in such areas

expressed their grievance that, against the values of the constitution, the restructuring of the regions humiliated them and allowed the Gumuz to seize massive fertile lands, which had previously belonged to the Oromo. The most disastrous part of this story was several farmers lost their lives and 15,579 people were displaced from both sides in the conflicts in 2008 (Ibid, 2010).

For lasting resolution on contested areas from the early 2000s, while the Oromo officials preferred a referendum, the Gumuz advocated a political decision by the federal government that should consider the history and geography of the area (EWARO, 1994). The federal government established many Gumuz kebeles in the contested areas that the Oromo counterparts regarded as a biased decision that allowed the Gumuz and farmer investors to occupy extensive fertile land. With the absence of a lasting resolution, border areas continued to be a region of intermittent conflict between these people historically claiming the land (Interview, 2021). Conflict arose when land tilling and harvest began. Robbing and burning of agricultural implements and crops was common.

On the other hand, farmers' interactions involved cooperation and conflict over resources. Access to land and the utilization of resources were central to the interaction among smallholder farmers of the valley. The conflict between the host as the land renter and a contract farmer occurred over the right to use land and disagreement on the share of products. The source of conflict between the local society and the Gojjame was complex and entailed interrelated environmental, economic, socio-cultural, and political factors. The principal root cause of tensions was their massive occupation of forest land and the deterioration of the existing means of livelihood (Tolera, 1995; Tafese, 2009). Elders congruently complained that farmers indiscriminately devastated trees for cultivation (Interview, 2021). The valley experienced massive deforestation from large-scale settlement and the process not only deteriorated the resource base but also alienated the local society from the resources such as plant and animal products, salt licks, and shifting cultivation as well as honey extraction areas.

One major cause of the conflict was the breaching of the contractual agreements over land or sharecropping agreements. Two types of sharecropping agreements existed between the host and guest farmers: *qanja* and *qorca*. The former term of the agreement refers to land rent through a return of a certain amount of crop for the possessor of the land. A contract farmer was expected to contribute all agricultural inputs including labor. The latter contractual agreement required only labor contribution from a contract farmer for payment of an agreed amount of crop. Such agreements could have a form of one-fourth payment to a contract farmer. In most cases, *qanja* was widely practiced to balance the benefit of both landholders and contract farmers. Yet, the process led to large-scale land transfer from the host community to contract farmers through the leasing out of land on a long-term bases or land sale to the contract farmers (Interview, 2021). The conflict was created when the host broke the agreement to get the land back and the guest farmer refused to hand over the land to the original holder. Contract farmers wanted to extend the tenure of the contract, counting the resources they had invested in the land and the possessor of the land might need an agreement that would generate a larger amount of income. Such trends in land deals were widespread, leaving members of the local society without land. By late 2009, local sources estimated the number of Amharic-speaking contractual farmers in the valley to be over 100,000 (East Wallagga Administrative, 2001). This implies a higher probability of resource-based conflict.

Resentment became intense in 2000 when local people heard the widely rumored allegation about the migrants' covert movement to make Guttin and its environs and parts of the highlands of Gida, KIRAMU, and Abe Dongoro a special Amhara Zone within Oromia Regional State. There was a demand from the Amhara-speaking people of the area to be considered a special zone, being dissatisfied with the exclusion of all non-Oromos from PA leadership after Afaan Oromo became the official language in 1991. In 2000, the establishment of "The Association of Guten Woreda Churches" coupled with the preparation of seals and stamps bearing "Guttin woreda" that did not exist was regarded as an act to help accomplish the above-stated intention. The ever-increasing influx of migrants to the valley in search of land and contract farming, and refusal to register and/or surrender firearms together with envy by the local population at the economic success of the migrant population created frequent conflict among ethnic Oromo and Amhara since 2008 (Interview, 2021).

Conclusion

Agricultural intensification after the closure of the state farms caused intense competition and conflict on land. In the two decades after the demise of the Darg regime, the valley witnessed a growing number of these farmers who played a significant role in changing the valley into an intensive agricultural environment. The actors involved in the land conflict were largely farmer investors, smallholder farmers, and local society. This was because agricultural intensification brought land use change that almost converted the valley environment into a dominant cultivation area. The limitation of access to land and the available natural resources on one hand and the deterioration of natural resources on the other were sources of resource-based conflict in the valley. The other cause of the conflict was the corrupted system of access to land and ill land use governance. Local small-scale farmers demanded free access to natural resources by considering local knowledge of the production system while farmer investors used to cultivate vast estates by applying the available technology and above all limiting every movement of local farmers in the valley. Besides, the unbalanced land use, inconsiderate agricultural practices, and absence of conservation activities degraded the valley resources. In the process, powerful actors became beneficiaries while the local people became victims of the change. The livelihoods of the local people were threatened by the limit in access to land and the degradation of valley resources. Such unbalanced socio-economic practices brought tensions between valley cultivators and the local population. Thus, limiting land grabbing, working on a balanced land use system, and supporting indigenous land use systems and land governance would ease the existing problems and contribute to development.

DECLARATION

This is my original work and confirm that it shall not be submitted to another publication unless rejected or withdrawn. I would also want to explain that there is no conflict of interest in the work from other bodies.

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