



# Contesting conventional wisdom on the links between land tenure security and land degradation: Evidence from Ethiopia<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between land tenure security and land degradation. It investigates how land degradation is viewed, and, in turn, managed by rural land users in Ethiopia through a case study in two districts of the Amhara region. Many have argued that Ethiopia's land tenure system lacks the tenure security required to stimulate investment for enhanced agricultural productivity and sustainable land use. The state's continued ownership of land has been widely criticized by scholars and international development agencies, arguing that it has created a high degree of tenure insecurity – which, is believed to be responsible for the lack of investment in land and the lack of environmental conservation. However, this paper argues that the narrative that the farmers' lack of tenure security contributes to the widespread land degradation problem appears to be misleading. While the literature suggests an inverse relationship between land tenure security and land degradation, the evidence in this paper contradicts this and mobilises relevant data to explain why this is the case. Despite tenure insecurity, poor people in the two Amhara study sites are making substantial investments to halt and reverse land degradation – though to quite differing degrees – and by so doing, are simultaneously investing in the security of their land tenure.

## 1. Introduction

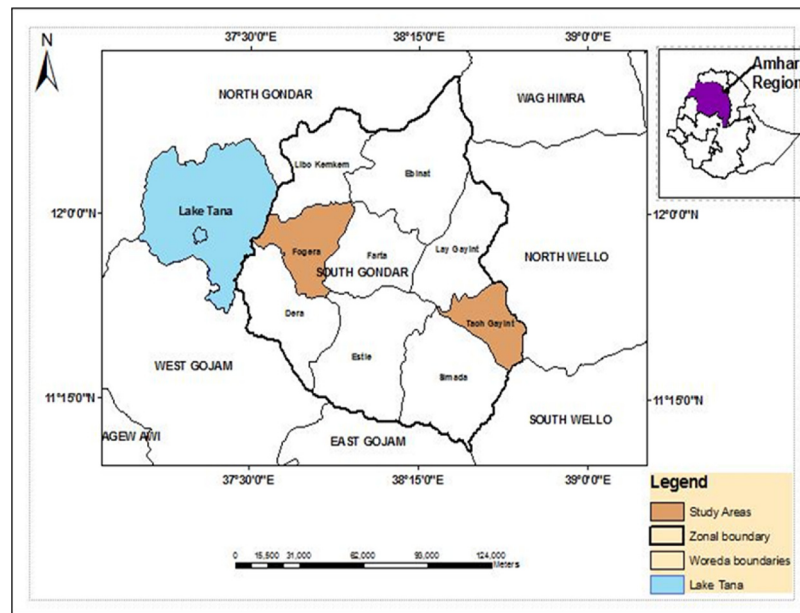
Across developing countries, climate change – manifested through higher temperatures, irregular rainfall patterns and extreme weather conditions – is increasing the incidence and scale of drought, crop failure and livestock loss, and is accelerating deforestation and land degradation and; millions of poor rural people are already being forced to cope with the impacts of these changes (UNDP, 2007; IFAD, 2010). Land resources and rights to them are fundamental to the livelihoods of rural people in Ethiopia (and indeed, elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa). 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. 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 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.

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). 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

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Map 1. Map of the south Gondar administrative zone (showing the location of study districts).

decisions” (ibid.: 559, see also Gray, 2003).

Since the early 1970s, environmental planning and policy in Ethiopia have long based on discourses that attribute environmental degradation to high population pressure and poor farming practices (Hoben, 1995; Campbell, 1991; Rahmato, 2003). Consequently, across many of the country’s highland areas, large-scale conservation works were undertaken, particularly during the Derg regime, using food-for-work projects and mass mobilization schemes. However, the conservation works were not sustained and did not largely succeed in bringing desirable outcomes, and peasants have often dismantled the conservation structures built on their cultivated land and hillsides. Top-down planning, lack of participation and proper planning were among the key factors that have contributed to the failure of past conservation works (Hoben, 1995; Campbell, 1991; Shiferaw and Holden, 1999; Keeley and Scoones, 2000; Admassie, 2000; Rahmato, 2003). It is also widely believed that rural land-users lacked tenure security that may have discouraged them from maintaining the land conservation structures (ibid.).

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 (Almeu, 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 (Almeu, 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. As this paper will 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 study 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 study 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). As an interdisciplinary field, political ecology helps us 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.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. The second section presents a description of the study areas and the research methods employed. In the third section, local people’s perception of land degradation is presented. The section also 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, local soil fertility management practices are examined. The final section draws a short conclusion.

## 2. Study areas and methods

This section presents a description of the study areas and research methods employed in the study areas of the Amhara region. 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 (FGDs), and observation were carried out to collect data (For details, see Moreda, 2016). Two case study *woredas* (districts) – Tach Gayint and Fogera – were chosen to represent differing socio-economic and agroecological contexts (Map 1). These two districts feature differing food security situations, agronomic potentials and livelihood patterns, as well as different incidences of land-related conflicts.

The Tach Gayint district has a population density of about 102 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. Most areas of the district have an altitude of more than 2,000 m above sea level (SERA project, 2000). The topography of the district consists of 20% mountainous lands, 12% plains, 40% gorges and valleys, and 28% rugged terrains. In terms of agro-ecological

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