



'Development Facilitators', Land Acquisition and Governance in Pastoralist Areas of Ethiopia.

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The savannah of the
Ethiopian Rift Valley
is used as pasture
since the earliest
history of mankind
Photo: T. Förster, 2007

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Abstract

While a number of disciplines studying African politics increasingly appreciate the presence of multiple agencies in public authority, the literature on land acquisition mainly concentrates on formal institutions, which often leaves behind a number of social processes orchestrated by individual agency outside the formal institutions. By looking at 'local level development facilitators' as one social category and a concept for analysis, this paper indicates that, through brokerage, development facilitators diffused theoretically separate actors, such as the state, local leadership and investment companies on the ground and impeded collective resistance. A case on land acquisition in lowland Ethiopia that began in 1960s and continued to the present time showed that 'local level development facilitators' took up flexible roles within changing development and political contexts. These flexible roles mingle various actors and institutions on the ground and, in return, shape the collective response to land acquisition.

Keywords: Development facilitators, pastoralist areas, land acquisition

Introduction

Recent literature on governance in Africa increasingly appreciates the fact that public authority is held by a range of groups depending on a particular field and time, in collaboration or isolation with formal institutions (Meagher 2012, Renders/Terlinden 2010, Hagmann/Péclard 2010, Lund 2006, Dia 1996). While this understanding moderates the separation between the state and non-state actors, a better understanding is required of the nature of a particular form of governance that is produced as a result, the legitimacy of its actors, the limits of their agency and diversity of their fusion with formal institutions across places (Olivier de Sardan 2008, Chabal 2009, Förster 2012, Mulugeta 2014).

The lowlands of Ethiopia, the subject of this study, due to their political and social distance from the centre, are often understood as peripheries (Markakis 2011). Until 1975, so-called customary elders, for instance clan and lineage leaders, were playing chief roles in organising public life, such as deciding on land distribution and use (Helland 1982, Feder/Noronha 1987, Bassi 1999, Menkhaus 2006).¹ However, this role diminished later during the military regime (1975–1991). The political decentralisation

1 Customary institutions have been extensively discussed in conjunction with post-colonial states (O'Laughlin 2000, Mamdani 1996) and decentralisation in Ethiopia (Bassi 2010, Gebre-Egziabher/Kassahun 2004) but mainly to their recovery and less on the divergent interests and hierarchies within them.

pursued since the 1990s, like elsewhere, revitalised customary institutions with a new vigour (Gebre-Egziabher/Kassahun 2004, Black/Watson 2006). Along with its emphasis on popular participation, the number of groups and individuals contending for political recognition and legitimacy at local levels increased (Kefale 2010, Hagmann/Mulugeta 2008). This means that, on the one hand, the lowlands of Ethiopia comprise features of diverse governance practices on the ground that emerges from the deviation and crossbreeding of institutions and group interests; and on the other hand, these emerging governance practices suggest the need for comprehending various actors taking part in governance. This is more crucial in the field of land acquisition and governance.

The literature on contemporary land acquisition in Africa, however, invests its discussions mainly on formal processes and institutions (Abbink et al 2014, Lavers 2012, Fairhead 2012, Deininger/Byerlee 2010, Cotula 2009). It empowers the role of investors and national governments in land investment and sees little space for players outside the formal institutions in shaping its outcome (Wolford et al 2013). Local communities and their representatives are often understood as defenceless subjects ‘whom investors can easily exploit because of their lack of the value of their land and its negative effect in the long run’ (German et al 2013:11). Major concerns are whether governments set up the necessary safeguards, establish detail contracts and protection mechanisms (for their citizens and the environment), or whether investors are well informed about the settings of their businesses and effectively follow formalised codes of conduct (Cotula 2011, De Schutter 2009). A few publications seek to evaluate how different actors are involved in land acquisition, but within the context of the state or in relation to the state (Wolford et al 2013, Boras/Franco 2010). Economists, for example, have studied individual agents, such as brokers, both as corrupt as well as facilitators, but their analysis is limited to markets (Watanabe 2006, Oldenburg 1987). A study conducted by Levien (2011) on India focused on the emergence of commission agents in Rajasthan village that facilitate alienation of land from their own villagers; it found that brokers preserved a broader goal of raising their status to the highest level in the land acquisition market. In development studies, some social scientists revived the study of brokers (James 2011, Bierschenk et al 2002), as individuals representing a bounded space but with conception of development beyond their locality, which allows them to span multiple actors and institutions. As an intersection point, they ‘make development legible and ordered to its intended beneficiaries’ (Sud 2014:599). This article builds on a similar focus of research, as it emphasises the development facilitators (as they are locally called), their shifting role across institutions and their capacity to render differentiation between various formal institutions inconsequential. However, it further argues that local development facilitators also affect the outcomes of land acquisition by undermining organised responses such as protests. Understanding such factors will help us appreciate diverse responses across societies towards land acquisition and why hypothetical reactions, such as protests and contestation, may not always be the case.

In this article, first, I argue that various forms of land acquisition exist that induce land use change in pastoralist peripheries. Foreign/large-scale land acquisition is just one form. Second, I submit that the land grab literature should not exaggerate the role of formal institutions in land acquisition and execution everywhere. To support this argument, I present local level development facilitators as the most ubiquitous form of public authority in land acquisition and governance (be it foreign or domestic, large- or small-scale) and not all are placed in a single, distinct formal organisation. Although facilitators often assume a primary position, such as clan leader, elder, liaison officer or investor, their everyday roles and status change constantly depending on specific contexts. Last, I try to show the extent to which development facilitators employ their authority to undermine collective responses in order to suggest their decisive role in land acquisition and investment operations.

Development, Land Acquisition and Local Level Agency

The process of land acquisition in many developing countries including Ethiopia (despite differing overseas views) is strongly related to development objectives such as economic growth. The official rhetoric states that economic growth is the intent (Ethiopian Investment Proclamation 2002). Ethiopian lowlands are domains for water resources surrounded by fertile lands. The state not only assumes responsibility to develop these areas, but also strives to effectively use them to “higher public objectives” (MARD 2010:17). In a country like Ethiopia, where diverse forms of land ownership claims are present, such transformations are made through official legislation that places land under the state’s ownership and, thus, standardises diverse ownership claims (Taylor/Bending 2009, Baka 2013). Standardising various property rights through land reform is, thus, not a requisite (but is common) among developing countries where contemporary land acquisitions are envisaged (Levien 2011:461, Lavers 2012:795). As a consequence, communal lands are redefined as wastelands to entice foreign capital, which ultimately reduces customary leadership leverage compared to the past (Peters 2013:557). Nevertheless, the role of formal institutions and code of conduct in governing land should not be exaggerated (Borras/Franco 2010, German et al 2013). Practical experiences show that the state attempts to assert ownership rights over customary holdings is vehemently challenged at the local level. Foreign and domestic land investments often take place within complex situations that are shaped by historically rooted conflicts over values on land ownership between the local people and modern administrations (Peters 2009, Wily 2013:12–13, Ansoms et al 2014).

Unlike the common rhetoric, investors can and will speculate such complex realities at the local level, and are aware of the social and political distance between formal administrations and peripheral communities. They know the multiple agencies involved in land use in their respective operating regions. They are often cognisant of whom to involve for consultation. That is, those decisive actors do not necessarily always appear in formally established contracts and their role is not necessarily defined by formal procedures more than it is produced on a daily basis with experience.

The master narrative states that foreign land acquisition in Ethiopia is largely based on coercion with little involvement of the local people (Gebre 2001, Flintan/Tamrat 2002, Abbink 2011, Makki/Geisler 2014). Nonetheless, while governments are major actors in processes of dispossession, particularly through their concessionary frameworks, land acquisition cannot proceed in a vacuum where local people and their multiple agencies are shut out completely. Even in the most undemocratic socio-political environments, people, either individually or collectively, respond in various ways (Bayat 1997, Scott 2008). The specific historical interactions between the local agency and actors at different levels ultimately select the specific outcome of such dispossessions. Regionally specific and dispassionate accounts of these interactions and actors are, therefore, necessary to understand actual responses. Even in areas where formal state authorisation and support are believed to exist, the success of an investment at the local level depended more on the means of local level interactions. An investor coming from the outside might at first understand little about the local settings and complexities, but will soon adapt to the situation. He will learn that formal provisions made at higher levels help little when it comes to the daily operation of his project. Identification and cooperation with a local authority is a necessary condition to operate. For example, it

is known that consultation processes are more complex with customarily owned land than privately or state owned land for many reasons: one of them being the complexity of compensation procedures. In such circumstances, it is individual agents that play substantial roles in interceding between different actors using practical approaches (Olivier de Sardan 2008). The identification of such individuals means understanding their multiple informal roles. That is, despite their formal status, the agents undertake temporary and situation-based roles and adopt practical norms to shape the type of local responses (Olivier de Sardan 2008).

The author understands development facilitators as one category of local agents responding to land acquisition and contributing to undermining collective responses. Local level development facilitators are individuals that facilitate the transformation of land from communal to individual use by reducing disputes arising from differences in interests and values between locals and outsiders. They might be located in one of the available formal organisations, but their everyday roles habitually cross the horizons of these organisations and fluently span boundaries that appear separate. Their shifting roles are necessitated by concrete situations and are acted upon in areas outside the formal organisations. This shift of roles in return may contravene a general assumption about roles associated with stable and noticeable institutions, such as in the state or private companies, where they gain their primary legitimacy. Often, these primary placements are more stable than the multiple roles they take up that are transitory. This article took the patience to review these temporary – or, to borrow Lund’s term, ‘meantime’ (Lund 2006:698) – roles played by individuals outside the formal field against their fixed positions that are often taken for granted. It is the author’s strongest conviction that studying such individuals and their roles is crucial to the debate of land acquisition because they play key roles in shaping the manner in which the community as a whole responds to land acquisitions. That is, the outcome of land acquisitions lends weight equally to the role played by local level individual facilitators as much as the terms and conditions entered between formal organisations such as between the state and private actors at higher levels. This is even more so in places where national governments assume only *de jure* control, but lack the practical competence to enforce rules at local levels.

Setting, Methods and Materials

Foreign land acquisitions in pastoralist areas are not new occurrences. It is rather banal that foreign investors prefer the highlands for agricultural investments. The type of land an investor needs depends on the type of crop they intend to grow. The lowlands equally attract foreign investors for various investment types such as sugar cane, cotton and fruits. International foreign companies originating from The Netherlands, Italy and Israel received concessions in Ethiopia as early as the 1960s. Many of these large commercial companies turned fertile lands into production of non-essential foodstuffs such as sugar (Bondestam 1974, Kloos 1982).²

Resettling pastoralists following large-scale land investments has been long challenged by different people who attempt to understand government resettlement policies with intentions “to bring fractious provinces under central control” (Scott 1998:248). They argue that the state’s expansion of its administration to the peripheries was mediated through allocation of pastoralist land to absentee nobilities and generals for their

2 These investments comprised many farming schemes in both the Upper and Middle Valley, such as Wonji, Nura Era, Golgota, Abadir, Melkasedi, AwaraMelka, KesemKebena, Amibara and Gelcha Dora.

loyalty to the centre. The nobilities, for the most part, had little familiarity and interest in the people and the area except for collecting taxes, which proved to be difficult as pastoralists resisted paying taxes. It is this trend that later paved the way for foreign investment.

On January 23, 1962, the Rift Valley Authority was established by a charter to strengthen and facilitate land development in the Rift Valley. Handlers Vereening Amsterdam (HVA), an international investment company, began to operate in the upper Awash valley in 1951: first in the Wonji area, followed by Shoa agribusiness in 1958, and then the Metehara Sugar Estate in 1965 (Girma/Awulachew 2007). Domestic investors and settlers coming from neighbouring areas also had received their own share from land acquisitions beginning in the early 20th century. Many were encouraged to settle as they were given plots of land for farming.

A close look at the Fentalle and Amibara districts (that are found within the Oromia regional State and Afar regional States, respectively, along the Awash basin) will help to understand the situation. The two districts have been known for covering the largest cotton farms in Ethiopia by both state and private investments. A number of small scale privately owned farms have also been established since 1991 through leases and rentals, and the scope of the land gained by outsiders through rentals along the river is increasing, but specific data is still lacking.³ I undertook frequent field visits to the two districts between 2003 and 2013. During this period, I had a number of conversations and made numerous observations with various informants. This contribution is made primarily from interviews with sugar estate officers, pastoralist groups, men and women who lost grazing areas and access to water, waged workers who retired and settled close to the concession area and settlers residing in both districts that had direct experiences with private investments.⁴ The second phase of data collection focused on pastoralists who kept livestock production and, at the same time, engaged in farming (they are sometimes called investors)

From Liaison Officer to 'Intermediary'

Following its first profit in 1954, HVA gained a total of 12'000 hectares of land in the Upper and Middle Awash valley. Lack of skilled and enthusiastic labour in its operation area was a big concern. It considered importing few trainers from its earlier venture in Indonesia. As the majority of pastoralists in the locality showed little capability and interest in farming, the company began hiring and training migrants from other parts of Ethiopia with farming backgrounds. Considering agribusiness expansion, the country at the same time established universities with an objective to train students in agriculture with the help of international organisations and universities (see the Oklahoma University in Ethiopia report, 1969). Some of these graduates, upon completion of their

3 The data for the paper is drawn from specific sites named Abadir, AlakaDebitiKetcha, Alegi, Elala, FutiLedi, Gelcha, Golan in Fentalle District and HasobaKebele (Algeta village), BontakKebelle (Banbas village), BuriKebele (Kelian village) and KomaGidarokebele (Gidaro village) of the Amibara district in the Afar Regional State.

4 The study used key informant interviews and focus group discussions with elderly people (clan leaders, estate workers and settlers, the last generation to have firsthand information from the early 1960s and 1970s). Written material on the history of key informants and their interactions with the investment companies is as good as inexistent. The few letters available are recent (since 1991) and limited to important events such as ethnic-clashes and trespassing. These letters were only used to validate information provided orally by key informants. Most interviews were taped and later transcribed.



Pastoralist
settlement
(Gelcha).
Photo: A. Mulugeta, 2004

studies, joined HVA. Sodere Gilo,⁵ under discussion here, among many others, joined HVA as a liaison officer. His task was to coordinate the company's activities, and to serve as a link between the estate and local pastoralists. At the time of the interview, he spoke more than three languages (Oromiffa, Amharic and English). He grew up in an area bordering on pastoralist regions, and he had prior knowledge of the pastoralist way of life. While at university, he received technical knowledge in both modern agriculture and development.

Sodere Gilo, the liaison officer, received special attention because of the place he holds in collective memories. Local people sometimes depict him as a representative of the state, a few times as the government itself and another time as a middleman/intermediary between the local and the company. From interviews, I learned that not many ordinary pastoralists and farmers actually knew his exact position within the investment company. They knew his residence was within the concession, but he also spent a lot of time in the villages interacting with them, socialising, asking to marry local women and to be involved in their social lives.

Written materials are very limited and indiscriminate to infer specific interactions between state representatives and local pastoralists before the arrival of HVA; however,

- 5 Sodere Gilo is used as a pseudonym for the liaison officer.
- 6 The title Balabat (and sometimes Yechkashum) is used to refer to clan leaders who were providing different services to the government at the lower level. In different contexts, it might also refer to nobilities granted land in lowlands.

many informants interviewed for this research have clear memories of the period that began with HVA investment. A few written materials in similar contexts show that, although clan and sub-clan leaders who later received the title of *balabats*⁶ were expected to play intermediary roles between the central government and the pastoralists at the local level, most of them had little connection with authorities beyond district and sub-province quarters (Clapham 1975:77). Despite their changing titles to *balabats*, which signalled their client status and loyalty to state administration, their loyalty to the state was ambivalent. Therefore, it is very difficult to consider traditional leaders' intermediary roles as given facts to all regions during state expansion as it is often reiterated for many African countries (West/Kloeck-Jenson 1999). From the interviews, the author infers little co-optation of Karrayu clan leaders by the state during this period compared to the Afar Sultans who were said to benefit and cooperate with the state administration particularly on investments (Tessema 2012:23). Thus, one should note that the extent of elders' mediation varies across places depending on the geo-political importance of the particular area (Harbeson 1978). It is this variation that suggests the importance of identifying intermediaries in diverse places other than what is popularly known among traditional leaders.

Many informants emphasised that during the 1960s the symbols, bureaucracy and establishments suggesting the state was an institution were absent in most pastoralist villages. Therefore, for the majority of pastoralists, the state was coterminous with the investing company and the same outside power. The state in its organisational form only began to consolidate along with the investment company. It is the investment company as a physical establishment that marked the introduction of the state administration from a transitory and personalised figure represented through individuals, such as Gilo, to a resilient institution. In view of the local people, this means that there was little separation between the state and the investing company. Besides, the fact that the investment was a joint venture between the company and the state made this differentiation more difficult.

Many pastoralist informants remember how appalling the instalment of the industry was: the bulldozing of the temporary pastoralist settlements and the influx of



Water source –
Awash river
(Awash National
Park).
Photo: A. Mulugeta, 2002

migrant labour from other places. A large section of local people residing in adjacent areas resisted relocation to different areas. Violent clashes were frequent between factory workers such as engineers, guards and ordinary pastoralists who swore to encroach on the concession. The pastoralists were offered resettlement but resisted mainly because they believed they owned the land and feared for potential conflicts with other groups in resettlement areas. For government administrators, temporary dry season settlements could be easily shuffled as long as pastoralists were given alternative settlement areas. Moreover, it was the investing company's condition that no pastoralist resided close to concession areas, particularly close to the cane fields.

A series of consultations between Rift Valley Authority (represented by different individuals) and local representatives, such as clan leaders, took place to gain local compliance. Furthermore, a team was established by the central government at the national level to revisit land tenure in pastoralist areas. At the same time, settler farmers who had earlier ventured into the area also petitioned for land ownership recognition, fearing that they might lose the land they were using (Emmanuel 1975:3). Most of this bargaining in the end failed to bring about local consent because conflicts, particularly on the question of who owned the land (despite the legal provision), were difficult to settle. This led to government threats on the use of using force to demolish the settlements. Here, I was told the investing company differed from state administration as it chose to continue to bargain further with pastoralist representatives through its liaison officer. Owing to the fact that the state authorities were eager to commence the project quickly, gaining compliance, even if it meant through coercion, was evident. Gilo was the last option left as dialogue between the state authorities and local leaders failed to reach a conclusion. HVA also realised that the environment was becoming too risky to implement its project. Thus, Gilo was left to choose the form of interaction to convince the locals. He was the person in close interaction with pastoralists on a daily basis, and he could reframe his communication with the pastoralists based on the particular setting and style, in contrast to what the institutions would dictate otherwise. He stated that bulldozing temporary settlements on its own was not a great loss as they were given other locations for resettlement. It was very difficult for the state representatives to understand that bulldozing pastoralist settlements would cause pain because it expressed a loss of rights⁷, greater than just losing one's shelter:

The Karrayu were living in Kuissa⁸ houses, they did not have proper houses. Demolishing these kinds of houses did not take long and they could construct the same houses anywhere else. Nevertheless, it was risky for the estate to let them reside nearby its farm. They could easily trespass into the cane plantation and cause damage (Gilo, personal communication, 2003, Metehara).

In addition, the pastoralists had a major concern about access to water (Awash River) as the investment evidently affected their access to a water source. With resettlement, they would be far from accessing the water source, and convincing them required an absolute trust.⁹ The government promised to provide such basic services at the resettlement areas. Nevertheless, such promises were not enough to gain their confidence. Gilo had to further elaborate the meaning of these promises. "Trust was not achieved at

7 For a similar discussion, see Rahmato (2011:4).

8 Kuissa are mounds used to describe the physical characteristics of these settlements as indistinctive shapes covered with woodand shrubs, as well as to demean their significance.

9 It was clear that the majority of pastoralists had little access to social services, such as schools for their children and health posts, which are often promised if they settle.

the time of formal bargain”, he said. Visualisation and imagination on the importance of the sugar estate were equally important. “I even showed sugar to the clan leaders. Most of them had not seen sugar¹⁰ before. They tasted it and knew that it was sweet. I told them they would also receive their share from the profit. On the other hand, I advised the state authorities not to use force” (Gilo 2003, Metehara). Implicit in his statement was how he shared and used the normative account of foreign commodities, such as sugar, in relation to modern discourse to convince the pastoralists.¹¹

The consultations helped to change their position from resistance to compensation for the loss of grazing land as they bought time for dialogue and explanation (despite their implementation). The deliberation on compensation, however, was done verbally and without any written evidence kept at least in the hands of the elders: although the discussion still transpired through generations and was enlivened by elderly men. Little is known whether any official agreements were made referring to this particular compensation. In the absence of written agreements, it is likely that such bargains were either made in the attendance of trusted individuals or fabricated to show that the pastoralists did not give the land easily. The author made an effort to discover any written agreements referring to the aforementioned compensation in cash or kind, but failed. Looking at the manner in which foreign investments operate in other contexts, agreements are often made between representatives of government and the companies at higher levels: rarely with local representatives. Therefore, it should be assumed that the promise on the share of sugar was a strategy employed by Gilo to convince the locals about the situation at hand. However, the local people translated this custom-made promise to be the company’s position. It should also be noted that, in such contexts, it is rarely the case that official documents are given more weight in legitimising agreements than trust. Nonetheless, as we see later, neither the estate nor the government fulfilled this ‘promise’ (in cash or kind).

Another interesting event in this particular case is the period during which the estate launched the massive import of contract farmers from other parts of the country, notably from the southern regions such as Kambatta, Hadiya and Sidamo groups. The rationale given for the importation of contract farmers was to find efficient and enthusiastic labour, which was lacking among the pastoralists at the project location (Kloos 1982:296). From the company’s point of view, the criterion for eligibility was based on farming skills. To this effect, the Kambatta and Hadiya groups from the southern region proved to encompass a range of farming skills and possess robust physiques to manoeuvre machines, pull siphons and cut sugar cane stalks. HVA authorities held the view that “the profitability of the industry largely depends as much on Kambatta muscles as it does on Caterpillar tracks” (Gilo, Personal Communication, April 02, 2004: Metehara). In contrast, the majority of the pastoralists fell among those least eligible for such tasks.

Consequently, not long after the demolishing of the temporary pastoralist settlements, the residence quarters of migrating labourers grew. Both the semi-skilled and unskilled plantation migrant workers stayed in these resident quarters at three different sites within the concession. Basic social services, such as schools, hospitals, water points and electricity, were made available for the labourers. The unwritten rules in the estate discouraged workers to attend school further than the sixth grade: advanced education

10 This is similar to the negotiation that takes place at the local level with local farmers in Southern Ethiopia where local farmers are asked to plant bio fuel instead of cereal because they will benefit more from bio-fuel.

11 Knight (2009) recognized that, in Asia and Africa, white sugar is a commodity associated with modernity. A similar association is also made by village intermediaries in Southern Ethiopia with regard to biofuel production as a symbol of modernity, as it has the potential to be used even as aircraft fuel (Fekadu 2014).



Settlers (Haro Adi).
Photo: A. Mulugeta, 2006

was thought to be a threat to the company. Therefore, focus was given to only to primary education (Alemu Gena, Personal Communication, September 14, 2006: Haro Adi).

Protests related to transportation fees and annual leave were ubiquitous, and management's attention shifted from bargaining with pastoralists to daily labourers within the concession. The migrant workers were allowed to visit their places of origin upon completion of the contracted work before renewing their contract again: the maturing and harvesting of sugar cane takes over a year (16–18 months) to complete (Gordon 1999). For the first few years, the estate management provided transportation services for all seasonal workers upon completion of their contracts to their place of origin to meet their families. Gradually, the transport service offered by the estate was discontinued, and the labourers were forced to stay within concession for a longer time, which encouraged permanent settlement. Some labourers still could travel to visit their families with their own money until the cost became unbearable. For most of the contract farmers, however, the discontinuation of transport services brought about the loss of their land use rights at their place of origin and laid down the foundation for a permanent settlement in pastoralist territory, even after their retirement.

The pastoralists and the schools that were serving migrant workers within the concession were allowed to use the health posts. However, due to their need to remain mobile for pasture and water, they rarely used these services. Nevertheless, little is known about violent conflicts between the local pastoralists and settlers. After the sugar factory was established and contract farmers were deployed, organised violence diminished to sporadic individual resistance such as burning cane fields.

The elders' insistence on compensation also changed again from sugar to cash for more than 10'000 hectares of land. The estate's reaction to such a request was simply to notify them that the company settled the matter with the central government and refused to further discuss the matter with pastoralists. The frequent changes of compensation modality show failures of consequent promises and local people's efforts to try different strategies: the lack of any official agreement also makes this compensation discourse ambiguous and flexible. Violent clashes between company guards and pas-

toralists continued, albeit sporadically, and only on a low scale. Events, such as fires in the cane fields without the knowledge of even clan leaders, were frequent at night but were not organised. Sodere Gilo saw the positive role of unabated discussions with the elders in neutralising organised resistance, as consultation with them was uninterrupted; bargains were made without any written documents and could be reframed every time depending on a particular situation. When the confrontation became worse, small redressing solutions were initiated. This is particularly evident from another case when the HVA management agreed to offer jobs to pastoralists in the neighbourhood as guards and cotton pickers when they asked for immediate benefit from the investment. Clan leaders were requested to assign eligible members of the community to the job. However, those hired in the plantation still kept pastoralism as their mainstay, and their job at the estate was only secondary. For the individual pastoralist working at the concession, his preference to use labour within his own household often created a discrepancy to the time allocated for the jobs at the concession. Due to this reason, some hired pastoralists rarely went to work; instead they sent their children and wives to the plantation and appeared themselves later to collect wages. The estate refused to give the wages to them since they rarely worked themselves (Gilo 2006, Metehara).

The pastoralists had a few economic exchanges with the estate workers that contributed to the smoothing of their relationship with the labourers. The management of the estate, for instance, allowed them to sell milk products at the concession. Despite the fact that many pastoralist children habitually preferred to take up their family occupation, they were allowed to attend schools constructed close to concession sites for labourers.

Today, the administrative and residence quarters of the estate stand remarkably in contrast to the pastoralist settlements that are scarcely developed. The residential quarters for top management officials were designed according to the Dutch officials' preferences. These houses have their own bathrooms and cooking stations reserved for top management and their families. Each family maintained its own garden in front of the house. The estate also grew its own fruit and vegetables available for estate workers at a cheaper price. Despite noticeable differences in style and quality of living between the pastoralists and estate workers, the pastoralists were oblivious to the luxury of new-



Settlement for retired sugar estate workers (Haro Adi).
Photo: A. Mulugeta, 2004

ly established settlements (their houses, bathrooms, gardens and even the wages that the estate workers enjoyed). What was often recited in the discussion was the loss of the rangeland, which provided a good deal of pasture for their cattle, that was then transformed into cane plantations and flower gardens (Ayantu, Personal communication, December 18, 2003: Haro Kersa). Some still could point to a particular plot within the concession area where their grandfathers and ancestors were buried. Many still point to Gilo and their regret of believing his story that they would benefit from the investment. The estate, on the other hand, held a very positive image for the majority of settlers residing nearby. Settlers especially from neighbouring areas such as the Argoba and other groups already arrived at the districts at the beginning of the 20th century following railway construction. From the viewpoint of these settlers, the investing company symbolised good life and the estate workers were taken as the most privileged people in the districts: they live in good quality houses for free and in a neighbourhood covered with vegetation. Compared to other government workers in the districts, estate officials were well paid and their children could attend schools without having to work. Unlike the majority of the settlers, women who were married to estate workers were able to buy most of their food items within the estate and often could afford to buy their clothes in bigger nearby towns such as Nazareth and Addis.

Once the estate farm had been nationalised in 1975, it effectively became state property, and a number of changes were introduced to its internal organisation. A major local outbreak of violence to re-claim the land took place at the height of the revolution; however, that did not change the inevitability of the estate to stay within the domain of the state. Pastoralists were encouraged to settle mainly on a voluntary basis and were rarely offered incentives. The earlier leadership was lost without a suitable replacement of the modern administration. A number of studies have been conducted during this period showing how such grand programmes affected the land use in the country.¹²

Customary Elders as 'Development Facilitators'

After a period of more than two decades of land nationalisation, the Investment Proclamation in 2002 once again revitalised foreign and domestic private investment, as a way of ensuring land efficiency and reducing poverty (MOFED 2006). This law followed the devolution of power since 1991, which further expanded the infrastructure of formal administration to the peripheries but also increased popular participation and revived customary leadership. A number of scholars show the extent of devolution and its effects on the dynamics of local leadership (Hagmann/Mulugeta 2008, Kefale 2010, Emmenegger et al 2011). The majority of these scholars analysed the revitalisation of local leadership as emerging patron-client relations. That is, individual clan leaders were progressively co-opted by the state to serve the state's interest. Nevertheless, one should not overlook the fact that these so-called "co-opted" individuals manoeuvred the fast changing socio-political situation not only to their own advantage, but also to the benefit of the group they represented. This is often common in societies where the individual is not completely detached from the group to which he belongs. At the same time, they are not static or unaffected by changes. It is by keeping the dynamic that they can uphold both their leadership role within their own community as well as cooperate with

12 However, since the author focuses on the specific period of private investment, less emphasis is given to the socialist regime (1974–1991).

others on similar goals. The reason they hold their names as clan elders and development facilitators at the same time is because they are able to play in fields of apparently different looking actors without opposing any of them, necessarily.

For this particular discussion, it is important from the outset to place the elders in perspective. The literature on local leadership in pastoralist contexts makes use of the label 'customary elders' in a very elastic fashion. One can easily learn that 'an elder' is a malleable, wide-ranging category without specific markers that is being constantly constructed by activists, politicians and researchers. 'Elder' is one label that fits all with no uniformity. In the more customary sense, the pastoralists, for example, clearly define elders (Bassi 1999). Their appointment follows unambiguous procedure. The author looks at elders who have traditionally gained their position as they are elected by their respective clans who, at the same time, are increasingly working closely both with the state administration and investors without changing their primary roles permanently.

A recent debate looks at how decentralisation raised co-optation and transformed the traditional position of elders (Unruh 2005, Müller-Mahn et al 2010, Emmenegger et al 2011). This relates to the debate about the transformation of their position through time that led to the loss of their legitimacy as purely customary elders. Nonetheless, this loss of legitimacy underway in specific fields and is both a result of external and internal factors. Internally, young pastoralists today trust less in the capacity of the elders to lead their communities as they lack formal education and are unable to see the bigger picture. This particular opinion often comes from the youth who attend school. They believe that the elders are not perceptive enough to negotiate with the government or investors



Elderly pastoralist
and his son.
Photo: A. Mulugeta, 2004

based on its current value. They believe that the 'elders' are not informed on the general discourse of future investment plans of rangelands and lack negotiation skills to benefit their respective clans. This was a concern already in 2006 during consultations held on an expansion plan of the sugar estate farm. The young men then organised themselves and offered to replace the elders for further discussion with estate representatives. The elders agreed that the sugar estate should confer with the young men further for community positions. This is evidence of an emergence of a new legitimate authority based on concrete situations on negotiations over land acquisition. Of course, the youth groups, despite legitimacy gained from the local leaders and their communities, were not accepted by the sugar estate. Many of these young men following this incidence were registered, given summer jobs during their holidays and soon had to leave for school where it became difficult to organise themselves again.

Pastoralists rejoicing about the government recognition of their rituals (Geda ceremony, Dhebiti).
Photo: A. Mulugeta, 2004



Regarding external causes, officials at district and zone levels represent areas within the regional state are not pastoralists: they come from non-pastoralist areas of the state. This often labels them 'less local' than pastoralists (Goodman 2000). It is only at the lowest level of administration that the chairperson of the pastoralist association¹³ is more likely to be a pastoralist or an agro-pastoralist. The administration at district and zone levels requires personnel that is trained¹⁴ and speak the language of state bureaucracy, which rarely includes pastoralists (the majority of the pastoralists lack formal education). These officials often assume superiority to clan elders due to their formal education and knowledge of bureaucracy. This image of superiority is already nurtured

through different symbols. For example, local elders are not treated differently if they happen to appear in the administration office because they are elders, whereas the appearance of an official at a local village may accompany various decorations.

While such changes are affecting the position of the elders, it is still ingenuous, however, to assume that local leaders are entirely co-opted by the government to fulfil the interest of the government. As a number of studies during colonial situations show that intermediaries and interpreters shape the relationship between colonial officers and locals (Derrick 1983, Osborn 2003, Lawrance et al 2006). The first simplification is to inaccurately consider the state's interest as standing apart from the interest of the pastoralists. Co-optation only occurs on a particular field where state officials and elders agree to work together because they share similar interests. In this case, however, we need to qualify into which public field the elders are co-opted. On matters of security, such as homicide and cattle raids, the elders often hesitate to collaborate with formal administrations. They weigh the cost of serving as 'informants' versus the responsibility to guard their members, including those taking part in what is labelled as 'crime' under formal laws. That is the main reason why the security departments at lower administration levels fail to co-opt the elders (in its search for witnesses and evidence) and suffer from incomplete cases to proceed with charges. On the other hand, it is very common to observe that elders jointly and peacefully work with formal administrations regarding distribution and use of land and related resources.

Therefore, one needs to adopt a situational analysis to distinguish between areas where elders, through leadership, cooperate with outsiders, including investors. Clan and sub-clan leaders are decisive in the allocation and use of grazing land in wet-season areas where livestock production is dominant. Individual family's access to water points and grazing areas are still, to a great extent, defined by norms established within the clan; thus, the role of the elders in such contexts is greater in enforcing these norms than areas where pastoralists settle for longer periods and farming is practiced. In areas where cultivation is practiced, the elders' roles become auxiliary to the state. These are areas that state infrastructure, such as police stations, court and land administration offices, are established. In such contexts, the authority of the elders is intermediary. That is, they facilitate the objective of the state, including investment, while maintaining their roles as the legitimate authorities on the history of land transfers, clan ties and size of land belonging to a clan.

When pastoralist's households (sometimes along with kin) intend to farm and appeal for their share from clan-administered land, it is the elders and the Kebele chairperson (state representative at the lower tier) that make the final decision. The transformation of communal land to private land is very complex and comprises unpacking various rights and addressing potential conflicts. The inclusion of customary elders in such context is compulsory. In areas close to water sources, individuals' enclosures of land for private farming without approval from elders or formal administration can occur but will often lead to disputes among clan members. The local administrators are highly dependent on elders for dealing with land related issues. They call the elders that cooperate with them 'facilitators'. The label fits the expectation: to facilitate land transformation from communal to individual use through moderation of traditional pastoralism and to minimise disputes.

The label 'investor' refers to an outside coming to cultivate in pastoralist areas through land rent. These people often are believed to invest in technologies such as water pumps, improved seed and pesticides. Fertile land along major riverbanks is the

13 Pastoralists associations (PA) are the lowest level of administration in pastoralist areas.

14 'Trained manpower' means individuals who have a formal education.

Animals drinking
water from trough
(Dhebiti).

Photo: A. Mulugeta, 2004



site of increasing demand for both large-scale and small-scale irrigated farming by both pastoralists and non-pastoralists. As the number of individual 'investors' wishing to engage in irrigated cultivation increases, the demand for land is higher (Gebre 2012). Solicitation is often made to clan leaders and elders to facilitate the parcelling out of communal land. It is the elders, not the ordinary pastoralist nor the Kebele chairperson who know where farmland is available for rent and the number of people belonging to a clan and receiving rent. The elders are facilitators of land rent because they are legitimate focal persons and can discuss sensitive issues with their members such as renting out communal land.

The manner in which land is transferred in such fast changing contexts requires flexibility on the elder's side. However, this does not mean a complete detachment from their past. The state administration, because of its increasing presence does not govern pastoralist land on its own; nor can the elders alone decide on its use and distribution any longer. More and more pastoralists are not accepting the eminent fact that land belongs to the state; in the meantime, they appreciate the state's acknowledgment of customary land administration. On the ground, clan leaders and elders are responsible for arbitrating disputes related to land inheritances and respond to applications for a farmland by a corporate group (clan) or outsiders (Müller-Mahn et al 2010). Nowadays, however, the application for farmland is increasingly coming from outsiders

and availing land for outside investors calls for further decision for the elders and the officials at the lower level. The rent value for a plot of farmland depends on the fertility of the plot and the number of people claiming a particular plot of land. This is particularly important as the investors demand large plots of land and contested areas that might require consultation with a number of people in a clan. While the elders provide information on clan members, histories of ownership and sizes of the land belonging to a clan, local administrators approve the distribution of the land for cultivation. Therefore, the local level administration's dependency on elders is unavoidable for local level administrators.

From Facilitators to Investors

On the other hand, investment expansion combined with an increasing influx and settlement of farmers from neighbouring areas to pastoralist areas using investment opportunities exacerbates insecurities among and promotes engagement of pastoralists in irrigated farming as a strategy of blocking further expansion from outsiders (Gebre 2001). This trend already began in the 1980s; however, the emergence of pastoralists calling themselves 'investors' (in English) is new. The adoption of the label 'investor' in this particular environment refers to any person, including a pastoralist, who wishes to engage in irrigated farming by gaining access to his share of a plot from communally administered land.

The label 'investor' is a precedent for a pastoralist's intention to transform communal land to individual farmland. Their engagement in cultivation will shift their status from a pastoralist to an investor, which is taken as a strategy to legitimise an act that could have been an illicit practice.¹⁵ The pastoralist investor category comprises elders, ordinary pastoralists and even Kebele chairpersons. On one hand, the elders facilitate land investment by outsiders (co-decide on the amount to be paid, forms of arrangements and the division of responsibilities between the owner of land and the investor). On the other hand, they also engage in 'investment' themselves by entering into different arrangements and contracts with ordinary pastoralists of a clan. In this specific investment context, they are not bound to defend the communal land, but rather to facilitate the parcelling out of communal land by dealing with the individual member of the clan who is attempting to rent their 'right of use' of communal land. There is little collective interest in such specific situations that require defence. His responsibility, as an elder for the collective, is to make sure that the individual approves the rent contract he enters into in order to transfer his use rights; he gains benefits (in the form of cash) as a result of losing his rights.

Conclusion

Land use systems in pastoralist areas have been affected both by large- and small-scale foreign and domestic investments. Formal organisations, such as the state, the investing company and local leadership, with different values and interests, may seem to be separate entities at levels where formal negotiations are made, but these separate actors mingle on the same ground. The local level agents, such as development facilitators, contribute significantly to such results. A growing body of knowledge is showing this fact, however, several scholars on land acquisition still treat investors, local communities and the state as if they were often antagonistic and lacking collaboration. Local communities are taken as victims lacking agency, and their governments are incapable of doing the right thing. It is the author's argument that, through a number of agencies, all actors that first sought to hold different interests share common practices on the ground. This is made possible through individual agents, such as development facilitators, who cross the boundaries between these actors and undermine collective actions. The land acquisition literature can benefit from an ethnographic contribution of local level interactions such as on developmental facilitators in their contribution to responses to land acquisition.

Two main points are drawn from this case study. First, development facilitators play very important roles in narrowing the separation between the state, investors and pastoralists on the ground. Despite the position given to individuals (such as the chairman, liaison officer and elders), which refers to their primary source of legitimacy, their everyday roles as facilitators is situation-based and comprises creativity that could not have been predicted previously. In the process, they diffuse boundaries and classifications between different sectors and types of actors. Second, the development facilitators, in their day-to-day practices, form part of the multiple authorities and shape the response of the collective. That is, their position as the 'elder', 'liaison officer' or 'chairperson' provides them with lawfulness and acceptance from communities to act and make public decisions. It is their primary position and source of legitimacy that enable them to play the role of development facilitator and endows them further with a chance to be creative and shape responses to land acquisition.



Followers of the government parading on September 10, 2010, the afternoon before the Ethiopian New Year's Day, to celebrate "Friendship Among Peoples"
Photo: T. Förster, 2010

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