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Citation for published version:

Chinigo, D 2013, 'Decentralization and Agrarian Transformation in Ethiopia: Extending the Power of the Federal State', *Critical African Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2014.853986>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/21681392.2014.853986](https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2014.853986)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Critical African Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Decentralisation and Agrarian Transformation in Ethiopia: Extending the Power of the Federal State

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Abstract

A controversial aspect of the Ethiopian ‘developmental state’ lies in the peculiar relationship between local administrative structures and farmers. This article discusses this local interface in light of the implementation of recent reforms establishing a decentralised system of land administration. The aim is to explore the discursive repertoire behind the implementation of decentralisation so to understand its significance in relation to the broader project of rural development. The article describes the local administrative structure, its agents, and how it reconfigures the relationship between the state and farmers in the rural milieu. The article presents empirical evidence from the case of Siraro *wereda* in Oromiya region, and makes a detailed analysis of how local officials and farmers experience decentralisation on the ground. The main conclusion is that, by legitimising and laying the technical foundation to a rural development project that relies on two main political narratives (‘equity and fairness’ and ‘efficiency and productivity’), decentralisation in Ethiopia has the effect of strengthening the already hierarchical system of local administration and thereby serves to further extend the power of the Ethiopian state.

Keywords: land reform; decentralisation; Ethiopia; local farmer-state interface; land administration

Introduction

The project of Ethiopian state formation has been characterised by a long and controversial history of domination, violent conquest and coercion, which, during the second half of the 19th century, brought the southern, western and eastern peripheries of the country under the control of the Abyssinian centre. Since then, centre/periphery relations have been informed by a hierarchical system of distribution of political power (Abbink 2002, 157) based on economic exploitation and cultural subjugation of the societies incorporated into the Empire. This system was put into practice by a combination of colonisation by resettled Abyssinians and the co-optation of a subordinate indigenous elite. When ethnic federalism was introduced in the 1990s as the main organising principle of the State, it was presented by the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) as a political compromise aiming to settle

the historical problems characterising state formation in Ethiopia. By granting on paper the right of self-determination to the plurality of ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ of Ethiopia, it was intended to neutralise the destabilising forces of ethno-nationalism (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003, 118). Although this radical and pioneering model of political organisation (Turton 2006, 1) has guaranteed a certain degree of stability and economic growth in the last 20 years, as noted by Markakis (2011), the project of state-building in Ethiopia is today far from completion. Markakis (2011, 356) also reminds us that “the real issue behind the debate on federalism, which ostensibly focuses on power sharing between centre and periphery, is the perennial concern with access to land”. Indeed, land is a key resource in Ethiopia and its administration is today one of the most prominent aspects of the long-standing dynamic of state formation. Migration from densely populated and ecologically fragile highlands, where pressure on land is exceptionally high, to more sparsely populated and fertile lowlands, is the main historical trend underlying this dynamic.

The 1995 Ethiopian Constitution accords the State a controlling power over land and natural resources – a prerogative that effectively concentrates extensive power in the government and its executives – whereas land administration is formally vested with the National Regional States (NRS). In practice, comprehensive authority over land allocation is vested in the local administrative structures of the *wereda* and *kebele*.¹ This authority is activated by both NRS and federal provisions, which *de facto* empower local state structures with land allocation and administration. In the early 2000s, as part of a broader programme known as *wereda*-level decentralisation, land administration was the object of important reforms which heightened the deconcentration of state resources and capacity from Federal and Regional bodies to local state administrative structures. As a result of these reforms, the most important land administration interface is now that between the smallholder farmer and the *wereda/kebele* administration. By presenting the case of Siraro in Oromiya region, this article examines these reforms of decentralisation of land administration and discusses how the political discourses through which they are legitimised reconfigure the relationship between the Ethiopian state and farmers at the local level.

The decentralisation of land administration in Ethiopia is based on a ‘hybrid’ development model constructed through a complex discursive repertoire, and drawing on a socialist version of ‘developmental state’², as well as on more liberal logics of decentralisation and privatisation. I argue that the implementation of decentralisation

¹ *Wereda* and *kebele* in Ethiopia refers respectively to district and village level of administration.

² For a discussion of the developmental state in Ethiopia see Lefort (2012), Meles (2012). For a broader contextualisation of the Asian experience see Leftwich (2000).

of land administration legitimises the transfer of resources and prerogatives from federal to local bodies, and lays the technical foundation to a rural development project that relies on two main political narratives. The first is a narrative of 'efficiency and productivity', which is based on the idea that improving the efficiency of local administrative structures is a precondition of sustaining a fast growth in agriculture. The current acceleration of the commercialisation of agricultural produce by both smallholder farmers and agribusiness projects is a clear example in this regard. The second is the narrative of 'equity and fairness' which advocates an active role of the 'developmental state' in driving the structural transformation required to sustain growth and development in rural areas, as well as protecting the poor from adverse market effects. Both narratives draw heavily on state ownership of land as a main political tool for the 'developmental state' to preserve a certain degree of equity in the distribution of landholdings and, at the same time, promote a structural transformation of the rural areas on the way towards a managed form of agrarian capitalism. In the eyes of its architects decentralisation of land administration is meant to release the potential of smallholder agriculture, connecting it more effectively to the market, while simultaneously protecting farmers from uncontrolled liberalisation.

The case of Siraro shows that a critical feature of the land administration interface provided by decentralisation lies in the peculiar relationship between party politics and local administrative structure. Ethiopia is characterised by a *de facto* single party rule, which permeates the entire bureaucratic machine and reaches right down to individual farmers. By empowering local administrative structures with important prerogatives over land allocation and by strengthening upward accountability relationships, decentralisation of land administration extends the authoritarian presence of the State in the rural milieu reinforcing hierarchies of local administration. Local officials justify and legitimise growing state intervention by selectively using the narratives of 'equity and fairness' and 'productivity and efficiency'. The case of Siraro also shows that the concentration of authority over land administration and allocation within local state administrative structures creates considerable opportunities for corruption and patronage. Finally, the recent establishment of micro-institutions to organise farmers under the supervision of 'Model Farmers' (*Adda Duree*) below the *kebele*, reveals that the project of rural development underlying decentralisation entails the active mobilisation of the rural population for political purposes. The political aspects of decentralisation cannot be conceptually separated from its economic and developmental objectives. Rather, in the eyes of the EPRDF, development is first and foremost a political process, a process entailing a transformative social change of the Ethiopian society.

The decentralisation of land administration in Ethiopia

The question of land tenure has always been central to the long-standing dynamic of state formation in Ethiopia (Markakis 2011). Land is essential to the generation of rural livelihoods, but it is also bound-up very strongly with issues of identity and power. As noted by Dessalegn (2009, 347), in Ethiopian history the ability of any regime to stay in power was strongly affected by its relationship with the peasantry, which often meant violent conquest, assimilation and coercion. Ethiopia is characterised by a hierarchical political culture constructed around Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003). The plurality of land tenure systems in place during the Imperial period reflect a complex and controversial history of state building, which culminated in the incorporation of the southern provinces by Emperor Menelik II in the second half of 19th century (Hussein 2004, 2). Land grants were given as a compensation for the services that armed immigrants from the north, also known as *neftegna*, rendered to the crown, and the local elites who were co-opted into a system of indirect rule (Markakis 2011, 12). This system provided the socio-economic and power basis for political control and military expansion of the Empire. The question of land redistribution was among the issues leading to the overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974 by the military regime of the *Dergue*. In 1975, under the political slogan 'land to the tiller' the *Dergue* implemented a radical project of land reform that entailed the nationalisation of all urban and rural lands on the way to building a socialist state (Clapham 1988).

After 1991 the EPRDF-led government decided to not question the main principles of the 1975 land reform, and state ownership of land was then reasserted in the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution (FDRE 1995). The Constitution provides for a decentralised system of land administration. Article 40 affirms that land and natural resources are common property of the 'nations, nationalities and people of Ethiopia', and it explicitly prohibits land sales and any other form of exchange such as mortgage. Farmers and pastoralists are entitled to use-rights free of charge for cultivation and grazing, and the Constitution explicitly recognises that they cannot be dispossessed of these rights (FDRE 1995, 12). By allowing renting in and out of both land and labour, the use of the land is more liberalised than during the *Dergue* and inheritance rights have been strengthened. Legislative power over land is assigned to the federal government and implementation is reserved to the NRS.

Further specification is given by the 1997 'Federal Rural Land Administration Proclamation' that, as a main organising principle, provides for the transfer of authority, particularly land redistribution, on land administration to the NRS (FDRE 1997). The NRS of Amhara and Oromiya issued their own legislations a few months

before the federal proclamation was enacted. Amhara and Oromiya then reviewed their land law respectively in 2000, and 2002. Tigray issued its land law in 1997, and then amended it in 2002. Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNP) enacted its land law in 2003. Nonetheless, a few years later the legislative framework of land administration changed once again.

The question of land was a major theme in socio-economic and political discussion during the national elections of 2005 (Abbink 2006; Lefort 2007; Harbeson 2005). At that time the government land policy – and particularly state ownership of land – was heavily criticised by several opposition candidates, and soon became one of the burning issues of political debates. Whilst the government reaffirmed its support for state ownership of land to preserve poor farmers' land rights, several opposition candidates strongly criticised this position by campaigning for more secure forms of ownership. As noted by Dessalegn (2009, 191), in this sensitive political context, the government decided to pass legislation in the dying days of the parliament. A new Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation (FDRE 2005b) was adopted, as was a proclamation ruling on the Expropriation of Landholdings for Public Purposes and Payment of Compensation (EoLPP) (FDRE 2005a). Soon after the NRS were required to revise their regional laws in accordance with the new federal proclamation. Tigray and Amhara were the first, issuing the new Land Administration and Use Proclamation in 2006 (TNRS 2006; ANRS 2006), followed by Oromiya and SNNP in 2007 (ONRS 2007; SNNP 2007).

Despite reaffirming state ownership of land and the main principles of the 1997 land law, the 2005 Land Administration and Use Proclamation (FDRE 2005b) may be regarded as an attempt by the government to strengthen the grip of the state in the rural milieu (Dessalegn 2009, 192). The Proclamation focuses on three broad political priorities. First, by pointing out the urgency to establish an information database identifying rural landholdings, it defines the details of a comprehensive programme of rural land registration and provides a general framework for its implementation (Article 6). Second, Articles 15-17 address the topic of decentralisation of land administration. Article 17 states that the NRS “shall establish institutions at all levels that shall implement rural land administration and land use systems, and shall strengthen the institutions already established”. Third, the proclamation also establishes rules regarding how to acquire rural land for commercial agriculture and industrial purposes (Article 5), and eases the procedures for public authorities to promote land expropriation for generic development purposes (Article 9) or when land is not “properly protected and conserved” (Article 10). This interpretation is also confirmed by the EoLPP which affirms that the “competent authorities” have the power to expropriate rural and urban landholdings for public purposes or when the

land is required for “a better development project to be carried out by public entities, private investors, cooperative societies or other organs, or where such expropriation has been decided by the appropriate higher regional or federal government organ for the same purpose” (FDRE 2005a, Article 3).

The 2005 land law and the regional legislation move in the direction of decentralising important land administration prerogatives to the levels of the *wereda* and *kebele*. These prerogatives include land redistribution, implementation of land registration and agricultural extensions. Beside *kebele* and *wereda* councils, which are elected institutions, the bodies in charge of land administration are the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO), the Environmental Protection and Land Use Authority (EPLAUA), and the Food Security Office (FSO). These bodies are the physical extension of different Federal Ministries and other government-led institutions, which hold power of appointment and dismissal, in the rural milieu.

More broadly, decentralisation of land administration feeds into the process of deconcentration of financial resources and capacity from federal to *wereda* started in the early 2000s, also known as *wereda*-level decentralisation (Dom and Lister 2010). Under this system block grants are allocated directly to the district level under a shifting variety of criteria. *Wereda*-level decentralisation is supported by international donors through various programmes. Among these is the Public Sector Capacity Building Program (PSCAP) started in 2003 by a joint collaboration between the GoE and the World Bank³. A main component of PSCAP is strengthening district level decentralisation and rural local government structures by making service delivery more efficient and accountable (Vaughan and Rafanell 2012).

The Two Political Narratives of Decentralisation of Land Administration

Decentralisation reflects two broader political narratives of land reform. The first is the narrative of ‘efficiency and productivity’ and is based on the idea that sustaining rural development and agricultural growth requires an efficient system of land administration, which will encourage investments in land improvements, establish clear and enforceable land-use rights, and incentivise the commercialisation of smallholder agriculture. This narrative draws on an understanding of land reform that stresses formalisation and individualisation of land tenure as a main pathway towards the modernisation of rural areas. Strengthening land rental markets through land registration and enabling the consolidation of small plots into larger estates are today among the top priorities of agricultural development in Ethiopia. Decentralisation

³ Details about PSCAP can be found at <http://www.worldbank.org/projects/P074020/public-sector-capacity-building-program-support-project?lang=en> (downloaded Feb. 2013)

provides the technical and administrative capacity to realise this rural development project, and also legitimises the transfer of resources and prerogatives from federal to local bodies.

The second narrative of 'equity and fairness' stresses that the state ownership of land is required to preserve equity in the distribution of landholdings, control the rural out-migration process, and also to strengthen household food self-sufficiency. The decentralisation of land administration is central to this project: promoting the structural transformation of the rural economy requires a strong state presence in rural areas (i.e. the 'developmental state'); a state (at least ostensibly) protecting poor farmers from the ill effects of the market. By bringing decision-making closer to the people, decentralisation aims to improve service delivery and agricultural extensions.

Decentralised Land Administration in Comparative Perspective

Decentralisation usually refers to the transfer of powers and authority from federal government to lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy (Ribot 2004, 17). This can take two main forms. Deconcentration, also known as administrative decentralisation, refers to the transfer of functions to lower-level bodies who are upwardly accountable to the federal government. On the contrary, devolution, also known as political decentralisation, involves the transfer of authority and decision-making to local bodies and downwardly accountable actors, such as elected local institutions. The extent to which devolution is effective depends on the degree of democratic representation and accountability of local authorities to the people (Alden-Wily 2003, 11).

Depending on the nature of local institutions and the powers devolved, the literature usually refers to at least three broad models of decentralisation of land administration (Cotula, Toulmin, and Hesse 2004; Crawford and Hartman 2008; Olowu and Wunsch 2003; Alden-Wily 2003, 2006). A first option is appointing administrative bodies from above. The composition of land-specific bodies varies greatly throughout Africa, and usually they are appointed by central government or other federal ministries, to which they remain accountable. Examples of such institutions are Namibia's Communal Land Boards, the District Land Boards and the Sub-County Land Committees in Uganda, Botswana's Land Boards, and Land Commissions in Niger (Meinzen-Dick and Di Gregorio 2008, 11). Appointed bodies may lack legitimacy in local communities, especially when their prerogatives overlap existing customary rules (Cotula, Toulmin, and Hesse 2004, 11). Setting-up new institutions is also costly and requires time before they become fully operational (Ribot 2002, 61). A second option is electing local government institutions. This is the case of Village Councils in

Tanzania, as provided by the 1999 Village Land Act (Pallotti 2008). In Ethiopia *wereda* and *kebele* councils are elected institutions. Nonetheless, other appointed government bodies, such as the ARDO, hold *de facto* authority for land administration. Elected institutions are usually more accountable to their constituency (Ribot 2002, 61). Nevertheless, the concentration of authority for land administration and allocation within elected local administrative structures is widely recognised as creating considerable opportunities for corruption and patronage (discussed below). A third option is providing customary institutions with a formal role over land administration. Empowering customary authorities through the decentralisation of power has improved rights and reduced conflict over land in some countries (Alden-Wily 2003). Customary authorities usually hold greater legitimacy than new bodies in local communities. This option enables the state to save the money that would be used to set-up new land authorities. Customary authorities may also ease the integration of customary land rights and formal law in the long run (Cotula and Mathieu 2008, 79). Despite these advantages, formalising customary law may reproduce and ‘freeze’ economic and power inequalities within the formal legislation – for instance over minority groups and women’s land rights (Alden-Wily 2006, 19). Customary authorities’ involvement can vary. Some have no role, whereas others actively participate in land management and even have recognised land tenure responsibilities (Meinzen-Dick and Di Gregorio 2008, 8). In Ghana, the Constitution directly empowers local chiefs with land management responsibilities (Ribot 2002, 6). The Ethiopian Land Administration and Use Committees (LACs) in charge of the implementation of land registration in each *kebele*, are composed of both state officials and local elders.

Whilst the literature distinguishes between elected and appointed bodies, and between existing and new institutions (Ribot 2002, 16-25), the case of Ethiopia shows that the extent to which powers are transferred – and whether accountability is either directed to the federal government or to the people – is not exclusively dependent on the nature of local bodies. In Ethiopia central government control is exercised through a variety of tools (Aalen 2011; Paulos 2007, 2009). First, the federal government retains ultimate ownership over all land. Second, the local administrative structure in Ethiopia is dominated by a *de facto* single party rule, whereby the EPRDF and its affiliates play a dominant role in rural affairs. As I will show in the case of Siraro, the system of local administrations overlaps considerably with the party structure at the local level. Decentralisation has perhaps contributed to blurring the boundary between administrative and political roles even further. The individuals implementing development initiatives are the same convening political meetings for the local party branch. Finally, local institutions largely depend on transfers of budget from the

federal government. This strengthens central government's grip on local administration. Overall, decentralisation of land administration in Ethiopia has to be regarded as a case of deconcentration because authority remains within the state structure and accountability is ultimately directed upward to the federal government.

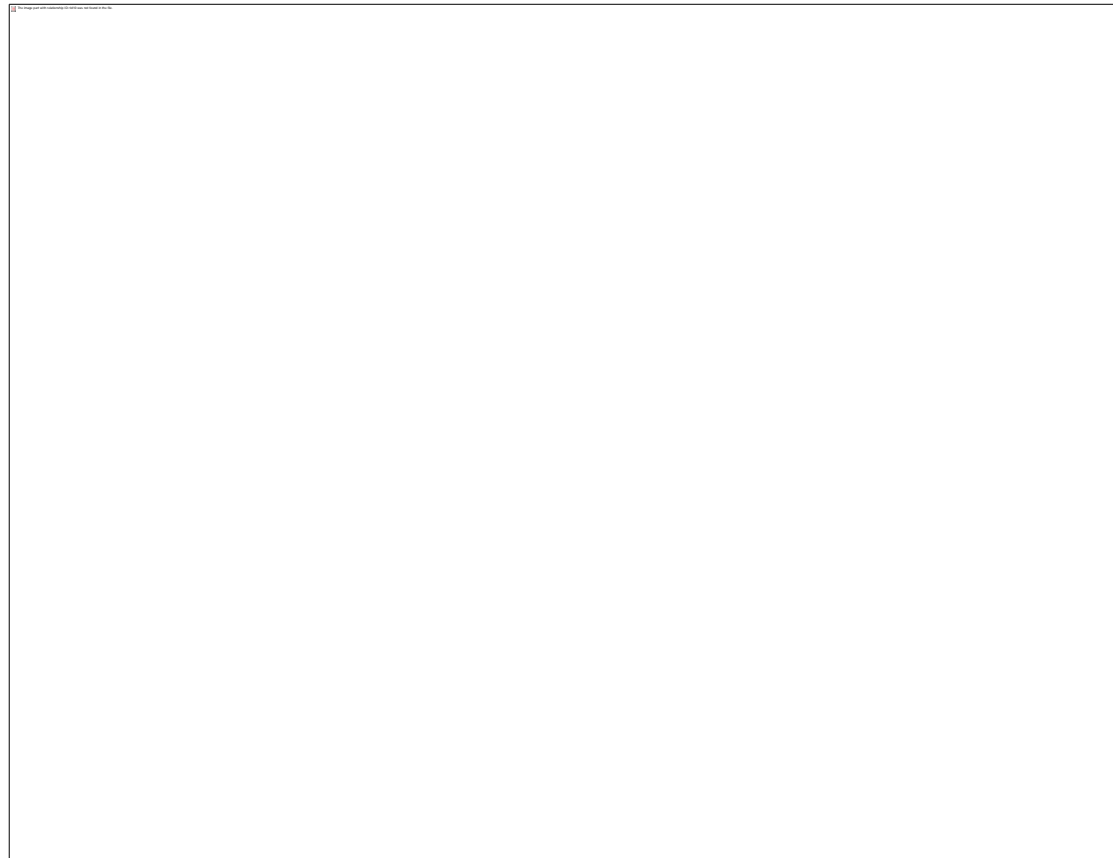
The Context of the Survey: Siraro *Wereda*⁴

Siraro is a rural *wereda* in the West Arsi Zone of Oromiya Region. According to the 2007 National Population and Housing Census (FDRE 2008), Siraro has a population of over 145,000 people, and is characterised by a very high population density (214 people per km²).⁵ Smallholder agriculture is the predominant economic activity in Siraro, and the agro-climatic conditions make its territory suitable for cereals, which accounts for the vast majority of annual production. Maize is by far the largest crop, followed by wheat, *teff*, millet and sorghum.⁶ According to the *wereda* ARDO, over 60% of Siraro's territory has medium to high potential for agriculture, i.e. is suitable for intensive agricultural practice.

⁴ Fieldwork methodology encompassed semi-structured interviews with 100 farmers in Siraro collected in 2009-10 and in 2012. I made use of qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. An open questionnaire was divided into two main sections. The first aimed to get general information about landholding, household size, crop and farming practices. The second included questions about policies and programmes relevant to land management and administration.

⁵ For further details see the report 'Physical and Socio-Economical Profile of Siraro Woreda' available at the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO), Loke Heda, Siraro.

⁶ Data gathered at the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO) in Loke Heda, Siraro.



Over the last thirty to forty years massive deforestation took place all over the district.⁷ Both official accounts and community narrative highlight that human intervention seriously affected the ecological balance of the district, with negative effects for agricultural activities. High rate of population growth is indicated as the main cause of land scarcity and environmental degradation. According to official statistics,⁸ the population is growing at rate of 3% per year and landholdings are between 0.5 and 0.75 hectares on average. Households are usually large and agricultural produce is consumed rather than marketed. Nonetheless, commercialisation of agricultural produce is an expanding phenomenon. Development interventions in Siraro aim to increase the food security of smallholder farmers and to support the commercialisation of agriculture through the production of high value crops. Despite this, local production does not always meet the consumption needs of the population, and periodical food aid distributions are required. Agricultural production is vulnerable to several factors, including: unpredictable rainfall, the lack of access to modern technology, low productivity, poor market integration, and shortage of agricultural inputs.⁹ Whilst Siraro is facing growing vulnerability, the combination of land shortage, population growth and uneven

⁷ Interview with elders in Ropi, Siraro, 22 November 2009.

⁸ Data gathered at the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO) in Loke Heda, Siraro.

⁹ Interview with the Head of the Food Security Office, Loke Heda, Siraro, 12 February 2010.

climatic conditions make the issue of land administration and management a very sensitive topic.

The Local Interface: Decentralisation of Land Administration in Siraro

In this context of precariousness, the significance of decentralisation has to be evaluated in light of the peculiar relationship between party politics and local administrative structure. As noted earlier and as documented in other studies (Vaughan 2011; Markakis 2011; Emmenegger, Sibilo, and Hagmann 2011), the local administrative structure in Ethiopia is characterised by a *de facto* single party rule, whereby local officials are first and foremost party members. At federal level this system is dominated by the EPRDF, which is the ruling political coalition composed of ethnic-based parties in the four main regions of the country (Amhara, Tigray, Oromiya and SNNP) and a number of other affiliates in smaller regions. The administrative apparatus at regional, *wereda*, and *kebele* levels mirrors the organisation of the party structure. Decisions taken by the party can seldom be questioned by administrative bodies, which are left only with the prerogative of implementation. As noted by Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003, 32), this is in part the legacy of a consolidated Abyssinian socio-political tradition, which historically has been dominant within the Ethiopian state, and that “emphasises a strict hierarchical understanding of society, where each member’s socio-political position and status is clearly defined and understood”. Being located in the ‘highland periphery’¹⁰ of the country, but with a considerable influx of populations from the ‘lowland peripheries’, Siraro was incorporated only at a later stage into the Ethiopian state. During the Imperial period, land expropriation from the indigenous population and its redistribution to the *neftegna*, the immigrants from the north, as well as the local Oromo chiefs loyal to the crown, consistently weakened indigenous systems of land administration. Since the reorganisation of the state under Haile Selassie after World War II, successive governments have brought land administration under the close control of the Ethiopian state. As noted by Markakis (2011, 12), by the turn of the 21st century “though uneven and ragged at places, the administrative coverage of the highland periphery is comprehensive”. Today, the Oromo Peoples’ Democratic Organisation (OPDO) is the key political player in this state/government structure, as it controls virtually all the administrative bodies at *wereda* and *kebele* level. The case of Siraro shows that decentralisation reforms, by strengthening upward accountability relationships and legitimising growing state intervention in rural areas, have reinforced an already hierarchical system of administration. This can be illustrated by

¹⁰ This categorisation of centre-periphery is made by Markakis (2011), who distinguish between ‘highland centre’, ‘highland periphery’, and ‘lowland periphery’.

discussing the role of some key institutions dealing with land management and administration at the local level.

The Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO) is the physical extension of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD) in rural areas. ARDO is found at different administrative levels – zone, *wereda*, *kebele* – and it has the prerogative of discharging agricultural related duties. Lower bodies only have the task of implementing decisions taken at upper level, as the former are hierarchically dependent on the latter. The ARDO is generally in charge of agricultural extension and of other specific rural development schemes, such as the Productive Safety-Net Programme (PSNP) and the Household Asset Building Programme (HABP). At *kebele* level, the ARDO is represented by Development Agents (DAs) who constitute the main political and administrative interface between farmers and the state/government apparatus when it comes to land administration and agricultural extension. Unlike *wereda* and *kebele* officials, DAs are appointed state officials who are not removable from local councils. DAs are exclusively dependent on their supervisor at the ARDO, who has the power to decide on transfers and turnovers of employees. Given that DAs are often strangers to the *kebele* where they are posted, and given that they are assigned to new destinations every one or two years, they remain only accountable to the *wereda* ARDO. Dom and Carter (2011) note that DAs are found at the frontline between two different worlds: they are at the same time agricultural extension agents and they act as conduits of state power by discharging political duties. DAs have to hold at least a Grade 10 qualification at school, and have completed at least a few years of further specialisation. In Siraro the DAs interviewed are also party members. DAs are usually young men – between twenty and thirty years old – eager to climb-up the social ladder as they consider themselves educated people surrounded by backward countrymen. They occupy a low rank within the MOARD structure, and they take their job as a temporary measure, in the hope of finding better employment opportunities, preferably in town, and if possible in Addis Ababa. One of them noted:

‘I am here only to make some experience (...) I worked for an NGO before, but if you want to make career in government jobs, there is no option but starting from the countryside. (...) Hopefully in few years I will be in Shashamane (...) and maybe one day I will reach Addis’.¹¹

In Siraro there are usually 3-4 DAs in each *kebele* and their interaction with farmers consist of the organisation of training and meetings. Interviews with farmers show that their knowledge of the local context is generally poor and training is regarded more as an imposition – something they cannot really escape – rather than a real

¹¹ Interview with a DA in Ropi, Siraro, February 2010.

added value. Farmers usually complain that training is either too specific – for instance focusing on sophisticated agricultural techniques they cannot apply – or too general. For instance one old farmer grumbled that DAs base their training on information they find on books, rather than on the specific needs of the local context.¹² Other offices in charge of land management and administration work in the same manner. This is the case with the Environmental Protection and Land Use Authority (EPLAUA), which by organising Land Administration Committees at *kebele* level is in charge of implementing the rural land certification programme. Similarly, the Food Security Office (FSO) coordinates food aid distribution and other agricultural related emergency activities.

All these local bodies are the physical and political manifestation of the state in the countryside and their powers and prerogatives have been strengthened by decentralisation. They are also the transmission belt between the party structure and local administration as decisions on development initiatives and agricultural extension are first taken by political bodies and then implemented through the bureaucratic structure. These bodies are not accountable to the farmers, who end up being mere recipients of government-initiated policies. Decentralisation of land administration in Siraro has to be regarded as a case of deconcentration of state resources and capacity from federal to local bodies where accountability is directed towards upper levels of government. This system ends up re-centralising state power and constitutes an extraordinary tool for the state/government complex to exert authority in rural areas.

More recently, other reforms contributed to extending the reach of the state into rural areas. Since 2011, the GoE encouraged the establishment of new micro-institutions below the level of the *kebele* aiming to rationalise development interventions, input distribution and tax collection. Despite some recent research which has documented these institutions (Lefort 2012; Emmenegger, Sibilo, and Hagmann 2011), there is no official government document explaining their functions in detail. Another problem is that their structure and functions vary from region to region, and sometimes even from district to district. In Siraro there are at least two different types of these farmers' organisations. The first is the *garee misoma* (literally 'development group'), which is a group composed of 25-30 farmers from the same neighbourhood (*gott*) with the task of 'promoting social, economic and political development'.¹³ The second is the *shanee* ('one to five' network), consisting of a group of six farmers where one of them is the 'Model Farmer', their representative *vis-à-vis* local government. As noted by a local official of the *wereda*, both these institutions serve the purpose of rationalising

¹² Interview with a farmer in Ropi, Siraro, 15 April 2012.

¹³ Interview with a local official of the *wereda* ARDO, Loke Heda, Siraro, 17 April 2012.

agricultural production, improving input distribution and piloting new development projects. Another official explained that the objective behind these organisations is improving the ability of the government to ‘help’ the farmers, easing tax collection, and ‘spreading development’ up to the individual farmer. Whilst this reveals once again a comprehensive project of social engineering at the local level, discussing the role of the Model Farmer (MF) can capture the political significance of these organisations. The MF is a key figure in this re-organisation of the sub-*kebele* structure, and his role assumes both technical and political significance. The MF has the responsibility of assisting the other five farmers for agricultural purposes, for instance by providing them with seeds and fertilisers from the cooperative, showing them how to adopt new agricultural techniques and improving land productivity. More interestingly, the MF is also responsible for collecting the land tax in his *shanee*. Whilst it is difficult to assess whether MF has full legal responsibility for tax collection *vis-à-vis* the *kebele*, it seems he mostly bears the political responsibility of mobilising farmers and being the ‘transmission belt’ between farmers and local government institutions. This is reflected by the fact that MFs in Siraro are also members of the local party branch. In principle the *shanee* democratically elects its own MF. In reality, however, this decision has to then be validated by the DA, who enjoys a *de facto* power of appointment. Interviews in Siraro show that MFs are selected according to a number of criteria including their relative wealth, education, land availability, availability of oxen and cattle, productivity and ability ‘to keep relations with local authorities’.¹⁴ MFs assist the DAs in their daily tasks and therefore act as conduits of state power. For instance MFs are among the first to be selected by the DAs when it comes to piloting new development projects. For this very reason, the DAs select the most dynamic and innovative farmers, and particularly the most politically receptive, who take both the burden and the benefit of implementing government initiated policies. Lefort (2012, 691) presents evidence that enrolment of MFs is used by the government as a means of massive recruitment to the party. Lefort distinguishes the economic role of MFs from the political function of ‘vanguard’, the latter being the most important criterion for selection. This confirms that decentralisation in Ethiopia has become a highly political project involving the mobilisation of the rural population.

The DA/MF system reveals that the political boundary between local administrative bodies and farmers is very permeable in Ethiopia. By shifting an increasing number of responsibilities for land management and administration to the local level and providing increasing power over land allocation to local officials, decentralisation

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

contributes to strengthening this already hierarchical system of local administration. The DA/MF system is based on multiple levels of upward accountability. The DA is responsible for his actions only before his supervisor at *wereda* level. His performance, and therefore his ability to climb the social ladder, is evaluated only in regard to his ability to discharge as fast as possible government-initiated tasks. At lower level the DA relies on MFs for implementation. Given the ambiguity of the relationship between MF and DA – *i.e.* being ‘technical’ and political at the same time – upward accountability (and therefore the power of the state) is also reproduced at the local level. Finally, the MF is responsible for implementing government-initiated policies within his own *shanee* and *garee* network. In short, the system of accountability provided by decentralisation requires both local officials and farmers to respond favourably to state encouragement and to conform to its political priorities without questions. Decentralisation serves both an enabling and a legitimising purpose: by claiming to improve distribution and allocation of resources in rural areas, as well as bringing decision-making closer to the farmers, decentralisation legitimises growing state intervention and a highly hierarchical system of administration. The case of Siraro shows that it is important to investigate the complex relationship between the federal state – which retains extensive powers over local policy making, local officials who are responsible of the implementation – and the people.

Aside from the relationship between farmers and local party officials discussed above, upward accountability is also motivated and reinforced by patterns of financial management of the local bodies created by decentralisation policies. A local official interviewed in Siraro noted:

‘the *wereda* has little budget autonomy to effectively run its own development activities. We depend on the transfer of budget from the federal government (...); we are responsible for our work *vis-à-vis* the government’. ¹⁵

Other interviews with local and international NGOs complemented this interpretation. ¹⁶ Local administrative structures lack trained staff and essential infrastructures to effectively carry out their tasks. Many *kebele* lack enough administrative capacity to effectively mobilise resources, and to carry-on a wide range of prerogatives provided by decentralisation reforms. It seems that decentralisation involves a relatively limited transfer of budget, compared to the increasing tasks and responsibilities it entails. Siraro district is thus able to collect only a small share of budget by itself. Given the dominance of the federal government in revenue

¹⁵ Interview with a Capacity Building Office’s official in Loke Heda, Siraro, 4 February 2010.

¹⁶ Interview with a staff member of a local NGO in Ropi, Siraro, 8 December 2010.

generation and tax collection, local bodies rely on transfers from the centre in order to carry out their tasks and meet their obligations. According to available data at *wereda* level, almost 90% of the total budget of Siraro comes from federal cash transfers. Several other studies confirm this picture at broader level (Chanie 2007, 2009; Garcia and Rajkumar 2008; Keller and Smith 2005). It is estimated that the federal government controls between 80% and 90% of all revenue, which then – through the ‘block grant’ formula – is redistributed to *wereda* administrations.

In short, the case of Siraro shows that decentralisation is characterised by a local administrative structure heavily dependent on the party apparatus; a system of new farmers’ organisations strengthening upward accountability relationships; and the lack of administrative capacity of local bodies. This has the effect of strengthening the already hierarchical system of local administration and thereby serves to further extend the power of the Ethiopian state in the rural milieu.

A Discursive Analysis of the Interaction between Farmers and Local Officials

From an analytical perspective, decentralisation of land administration in Siraro is based on two broader political narratives: the narrative of ‘equity and fairness’, and of ‘efficiency and productivity’. These two narratives are represented well in the following quotation, when a local official of the ARDO was asked to comment on the political and developmental significance of decentralisation:

‘Decentralisation is important for at least two reasons. First, to improve agricultural productivity and agricultural commercialisation our farmers need assistance from the government. *Wereda* and *kebele* (...) assist the farmers to design their own development plans. (...) Second, our objective is protecting the poorest farmers. (...) The land in Ethiopia belongs to the people and we are here to maximise the benefits for each farmer’.¹⁷

The first part of the quotation highlights a narrative of ‘efficiency and productivity’ and contends that supporting smallholder agriculture and its connection to the market is the main priority of rural development in Siraro. The second part of the quotation highlights a narrative of ‘equity and fairness’ whereby development initiatives are meant to guarantee a certain degree of equality amongst farmers, and protect the ‘poorest farmers’. This quotation also reveals that the project of rural development underlying decentralisation is a very political one. Decentralisation plays both an enabling and a legitimising role. From a technical perspective it is purported to improve service delivery and resource distribution and bring decision-making closer to farmers. Thus, ‘improving land productivity’ and ‘commercialising agricultural production’ require a strong ‘developmental state’ that, through decentralisation,

¹⁷ Interview with a *wereda* Official in Ropi, Siraro, 10 February 2010.

would promote a structural transformation of the rural economy. Whereas the state is the ‘manager’ of this national development project, decentralisation is the main tool at its disposal to support food self-sufficiency and diversifying the rural economy. This is evident from the view of an official in the Capacity Building Office who argued that:

‘*Kebele* and *wereda*’s objective is improving delivery of local services and allowing a more efficient use of land and agricultural inputs. (...) Our economy – alongside with many Ethiopian rural districts – is based on subsistence agriculture. (...) Land administration plays an important role in safeguarding local production, creating the condition for improving food security, and at the same time promoting the commercialisation of agriculture (...) the rural economy will benefit in terms of both growing productivity and increased food security’.¹⁸

This quotation, which reflected a popular sentiment, shows that local officials reproduce the dominant discourse of decentralisation of land administration and rural development, based on the narratives of ‘efficiency and productivity’ and ‘equity and fairness’. This discourse recalls the principles of the Agriculture Development-Led Industrialisation Strategy (ADLI), the approach to rural development embraced by the EPRDF in the 1990s. The main objective of ADLI is “to bring about a structural transformation in the productivity of peasant agriculture” and so to “streamline and reconstruct the manufacturing sector” (FDRE 1993, 1). Through an initial push on agriculture, ADLI is meant to diversify the economy and sustain industrialisation in the long run. In the eyes of the EPRDF, achieving food self-sufficiency is the precondition for the take-off of agriculture. Whilst today the EPRDF has largely re-framed this strategy, and has emphasised the necessity to create a market-based economy pushed by the developmental state (FDRE 2010), the narratives of ‘efficiency and productivity’ and ‘equity and fairness’ are both still central to the project of rural development.

An important effect of the decentralisation of land administration is that the concentration of authority within local state administrative structures creates considerable opportunities for corruption and patronage. It is not uncommon to hear farmers complaining that local officials use the power of land allocation, the selection of farmers for development schemes, and the allocation of agricultural extensions to reward political allies and to strengthen patronage networks. One farmer noted:

‘they [local officials] often change the criteria to select people for development programmes, for instance the PSNP (...), and always at the benefit of relatives, or for political reason (...) I don’t know if they really change the rules, but that is how it works (...) if you show yourself active, and committed

¹⁸ Interview with a Capacity Building Office’s official in Loke Heda, Siraro, 4 February 2010.

to the activities of the party, it is easier to be involved in development programmes, or being selected by NGOs for support'.¹⁹

Whereas it is worth noting that many farmers tend to frame their relationship with local officials in 'us versus them' terms, episodes of petty corruption generate frustration among farmers, and local officials often become the target of resentment. As one farmer noted:

'there is really nothing you can do about that (...) this is how Ethiopia works, there are anti-corruption signposts in all government offices, but it is difficult to find people that, when the chance comes, don't get involved'.²⁰

From this perspective, the lack of accountability of the local bodies to the people makes corruption a normal mechanism to the functioning of the Ethiopian state. This makes the question of land administration an even more sensitive topic. In a context where land is an increasingly scarce resource, the power accorded to the local officials is central to the reproduction and legitimation of patronage relations. Decentralisation has transferred important land administration prerogatives to the local administrative structures, and farmers have no choice but to comply with their decisions. And yet, local officials may not share central government objectives, and they may prefer to divert central funds to meet objectives of higher value to them. Local officials thus have to mediate between the directives coming from 'above' and the demands of the people. This is often a very difficult position to be in. Local officials have to implement directives from central government without question, much less dissent, and often at very short notice. Given the political sensitivity of land issues, this often results in the imposition of unpopular decisions that severely damage the relationship between local officials and farmers. Rather than bringing decision-making closer to the people, decentralisation has probably created further distance between local institutions and rural dwellers.

Farmers in Siraro are well aware of the GoE's objectives on land administration and their implications to rural development. When asked to enumerate the most pressing issues of development in Siraro, farmers usually include shortage of land, scarcity of agricultural inputs, low productivity and distance from the marketplace. As one farmer told me:

'the marketplace is far from our house. We need to walk for one day to get there (...) sometimes the price is not good and it is not worth the effort. (...) Another problem is that we rely on the *kebele* for

¹⁹ Interview with a farmer in Siraro, 22 November 2009.

²⁰ Interview with a farmer in Ropi, Siraro, 16 November 2009.

seeds and fertilisers. Last season we had to pay in advance and we got the fertilisers after the sowing time. It was a disaster. (...)Also, I do not have enough land, I have to share it with my three sons'.²¹

When asked what the government is trying to do about that, farmers give more contradictory answers. MFs are usually very positive and, interestingly, as the local officials they reproduce the same dominant discourse of rural development based on the two narratives of 'equity and fairness' and 'efficiency and productivity'. One MF, for example, noted that:

'Recently we were organised in *shanee* (...) I am the model farmer and I am responsible for my neighbours to the *kebele* (...) we are also organised in *garee* (...), ours is composed by 27 farmers (...) I think the government is supporting us, these forms of cooperation between farmers are important for improving our life'.²²

By reproducing the dominant discourse, MFs also emphasise 'mobilisation' of farmers as an important political aspect of the rural development project. Other farmers are usually quite negative about the rural development interventions and they complain that their condition is getting worse. They usually avoid taking strong positions against the 'government' in public, but in more informal one-to-one discussions their opinions come out clearly. What they complain about is that they are constantly engaged by the government/party for political and development purposes. Farmers perceive this as a one-way relationship: local officials, they say, never 'listen to us' and 'come only with the purpose of instructing us' about new political and developmental initiatives without any possibility of question. This is a source of irritation for farmers, who have no option but passively conforming to such pressure. As noted by one of farmer in Sambaté:

'They [local officials] convene this meeting every month, sometimes every two weeks, but it is just a waste of time (...), and I am compelled to attend these meetings. The main point they make is that they are responsible for land allocation (...), that land registration is important to sustain agriculture. (...) What can I do? I have no option but to follow what they say'.²³

Farmers feel obligated to demonstrate commitment to every government initiated programme, and there are few opportunities to avoid the interaction with local officials. As one farmer in Alemtena observed:

'Sometimes it is difficult for me to attend all these meetings. I live quite far from the *kebele* centre. But if I do not show-up, then they start thinking I am against the government. But I am not'.²⁴

²¹ Interview with a farmer in Ropi, Siraro, 27 November 2009.

²² Interview with a farmer in Alemtena, Siraro, 14 April 2012.

²³ Interview with a farmer in Sambaté, Siraro, 28 November 2009.

²⁴ Interview with a farmer in Alemtena, Siraro, 19 April 2012.

In reference to a similar situation in Amhara, Aspen (2002, 69) argues that the only option available for the farmers is trying “to minimise the contact with the state by obeying only the inescapable demands it imposes on the peasantry, and otherwise to ignore it”. It seems that the experience of decentralisation of land administration in Siraro follows a similar pattern. James Scott’s (1985; 1990) classic works on domination and resistance are useful for understanding this relationship between the Ethiopian state and farmers. Scott reminds us that “[t]he process of domination generates a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power” (1990, xii). More specifically, Scott traces a distinction between *public transcript* and *hidden transcript* (Scott 1990), the former describing the open interaction between dominant and subordinate groups, the latter the discourse taking place ‘offstage’, beyond the direct observation of people in power. If we adapt this framework to the case discussed, the *public transcript* can be witnessed in the manner in which farmers outwardly acquiesce to the government’s demands for their participation in the process of decentralisation. However, this public show does not necessarily signal their support for such schemes: it simply reflects the inescapable reality that they must engage with the state in order to pursue their interests; the consequences of not doing so are too severe. On the other hand, the *hidden transcript* is the subordinate discourse of farmers, made up of complaints and grumbles, and characterised by their passive involvement in government’s developmental/political activities. The case of Siraro seems to confirm Scott’s (1990, 3) proposition that “[t]he greater the disparity in power between dominant and subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast. In other words, the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask”. Although in the mind of its designers the political mobilisation of the rural society is a central aspect of decentralisation, the presence of a widespread subordinate discourse, a *hidden transcript*, shows that this project is also often contested and challenged.

Conclusion

Ethiopia has become one of the fastest growing economies in Africa. In the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP), the government has set the ambitious target to become a middle income country by 2025 (FDRE 2010). Nevertheless, the question of land is far from being resolved. Agricultural growth remains a critical challenge and, in the last few years, pressure on land has increased as a result of population pressure and the expansion of commercial farming and plantations. As noted by Markakis (2011), the future of the country, and the consolidation of state power, will depend largely on how the ruling elite will deal with these important issues and the transformations they will bring about.

To date, studies on Ethiopia have seldom discussed decentralisation in light of the broader debate on land reform. This article constitutes a first attempt to fill this gap. I have shown that decentralisation of land administration in Ethiopia is constructed through a complex discursive repertoire, which reveals a hybrid model of rural development, and entails a comprehensive project of rural social engineering and micro-level institution building. In the eyes of its architects, this political project aims to promote a structural transformation of the rural economy on the way towards a managed or inclusive form of agrarian capitalism. If the ‘developmental state’ is the manager of this project, decentralisation is the main tool for implementation. In a recent article, Lefort (2012, 682) lucidly notes that today this project has largely been framed in terms of “capturing the private initiative of farmers so as to intensify marketable farm products”, and that, as a result, semi-subsistence farmers are no longer the main strategic priority of the EPRDF. Whilst this is true, the case of Siraro shows that, at least at a discursive level, improving food security and ensuring an equitable distribution of landholdings remain key priorities for rural development. The strategy for rural development in Ethiopia is probably undergoing a change of emphasis from ‘equity and fairness’ to ‘efficiency and productivity’, but both narratives remain central to the project of structural change of the rural economy as it is currently framed by the EPRDF. In the EPRDF’s view, state ownership of land is the most important element of the political project of rural transformation. Given that state ownership of land is also central to both narratives, the EPRDF believes that ‘equity and fairness’ and ‘efficiency and productivity’ are not contradictory. Rather, they are both essential ideological instruments for the ‘developmental state’ to promote an inclusive process of rural transformation and, at the same time, protect the weakest strata of the rural population. However, the case of Siraro has shown that this dominant discourse is also contested and challenged, if only in discreet ways, by farmers. More broadly, this paper has revealed that decentralisation, being informed by both the narratives of ‘equity and fairness’ and ‘efficiency and productivity’, has indeed transferred important land administration prerogatives to the local administrative structures but, at the same time, has had the paradoxical effect of strengthening an already hierarchical system of local administration. Decentralisation in Ethiopia is characterised by a local administrative structure heavily dependent on the party apparatus, and further extended the authoritarian presence of the state in the rural milieu. Whilst Ethiopian state-builders seem to have in mind a very clear project of rural transformation, history has taught us that the outcome of such projects is very difficult to predict, and that the political consequences of reforms are every bit as important to understand as their developmental efficacy.

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