

LOST OPPORTUNITIES OR STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS: ETHIOPIA'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC HISTORY AND THE PROBLEM OF FOOD PRODUCTION FROM 1900 TO 2000.

Background and objectives

In 1960s Ethiopia was self-sufficient in food production as well as food exporting country.¹ In 1990, thirty years later however, Ethiopia produced six percent less food compared to what it did 1960². Between 1960 and 1990, the population increased from an estimated 25 million to about 60 million. Since the early 1970s, Ethiopia has either to import food or depend on food aid to cover its annual shortfall. Food insecurity has become a hallmark of the Ethiopian landscape. Yet agriculture is crucial as more than 80 percent of the population directly depend on it. At best of times Ethiopian agricultural output covers about half of the food requirements. The pressure on the agrarian sector is bound to increase as the population of Ethiopia is expected to double in the coming 25 years, and this in spite of the disastrous impact caused by HIV/AIDS.

This research project has two objectives. The first objective is to explain why Ethiopia failed to achieve self-sufficiency in food production during the last century. A satisfactory explanation of the problem of food production has to answer at least some of these questions. Why and how did Ethiopia revert back from a food exporting country into a chronic food dependency? What opportunities did Ethiopia lose in the transition from the Imperial system (1916-1974) to the Socialist/military regime (1974-1991) and finally to the current ethnic federal system? What are the patterns of transformation and continuity in property tenure relations? What are the internal factors over time that led to the serious decline of food production? To what extent is the political construction of Ethiopia (first as empire, then as a socialist republic and now as an ethnic federation) an obstacle to food production? How is political power conceived and used? What are the cultural determinants of production? To what extent are Ethiopian government initiators and implementers of their economic policies? What were the roles of the external factors such as the Cold War, the donor agencies, NGOs in the economic landscape of the country? How is the progressive consolidation of the network society and its global economic culture impinging on Ethiopian economic and political cultures?

The questions mentioned above could neither be fully answered by a single researcher or by a single discipline. Explaining the problem of food production (or

¹ Gilkes, 1975; Henze, 2000; Woldemariam,...

² Befecadu Degfie and Berhanu Nega, 2000:384

agrarian crisis) over an extended period of time thus requires a collaborative effort and an interdisciplinary approach.

The second objective of the research project is to provide a sufficient documentation that could enhance and strengthen the culture of policy studies. The prevailing research strongly suggests that Ethiopian policy formation and implementation has always been top down. Successive governments in Ethiopia have shown little interest in enlarging or encouraging wider debate around policy issues with the various stakeholders, among whom the intellectual/academic community is an important player. Compared to earlier governments this present government has shown far more readiness to engage the emerging civil society (political parties, free press, professional associations, local NGOs etc.) in policy formation, but a great deal of attitudinal changes are needed.

The project in relation to other research

The research on African development carried out during the last fifteen years can be summed up by the views put forward in *Africa Works: Disorder as political instrument, 1999* and in *Population Growth and Agricultural Change in Africa, 1993*. According to the authors of *Africa Works: Disorder as political instrument* Africa has failed to modernise in the sense that modernisation is “the outcome of the combined and self-reinforcing effects of social and economic development”³. Africa, it is further argued, has also failed to develop if development is measured in terms of economic success and technological advance. Africa has certainly failed to develop and modernise in the sense these concepts are understood in the West; yet Africa is fully modern. What Westerners see as failure of development and the widespread of wars are signs of modernity fully owned, managed and run by Africans themselves. Africans appear to manage well in the wars that surround them. The authors argue the problems lies in Africa’s cultural features. Briefly, the authors state that the African lacks individuality, has a strange conception of time, is victimised by the logic of reciprocity with undue emphasis on vertical links and has a logic of success that is antithetical to the economic

³ Chabal & Daloz, 1999:145

mentality underpinning development⁴. While I do agree that with the authors about the failure of development and the instrumentalisation of disorder, their explanatory paradigm leaves a great deal to be desired. The “debilitating” aspects of African culture that the authors of *Africa Works* dwell upon are not new and have been examined by earlier authors⁵ and such interpretation has been strongly contested in a recent study on the history of Capitalism⁶. *Africa Works* has a great merit because it creates a platform to examine the reasons for the failure of development. Hence the first theoretical task of this research study is to assess the methodological and theoretical arguments put forward by Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz.

In a seminal study *On Population Growth and Agricultural Change* (1993) the authors candidly state that there is no macro-theory to explain the crisis of the agrarian sector in Africa⁷. They further state that there is no single solution to the crisis just as there is no concise or simple theory to guide as a solution to the crisis. The crisis of the agrarian sector is not only an Ethiopian phenomenon; it is by and large, a problem that affects the great majority of countries south of the Sahara. There is a considerable literature on the causes of the crisis; some of which are population pressure, badly conceived donor imputes, anti-rural policies of governments and structural factors⁸ Most of these studies put the major blame (and quite rightly) on the policies adopted by African governments. But there is very little in-depth analysis as to why African governments continue to pursue policies that discourage the production of food crops.

What has been said about Africa in general, I believe, holds true for Ethiopia as well. Hence the second theoretical task of this study is first to investigate if a historical enquiry on the agricultural policies of the Ethiopian State could contribute towards a new understanding of the agrarian crisis.

As regards the state of research specifically on Ethiopia, there is a wide range of specialised literature on most of the aspects that are central to this project. Land tenure as an independent subject and as part of the economic and social history has during the

⁴ Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 156-163

⁵ Bozeman, 1976; Boahen, 1987

⁶ Cf. De Soto, 2000

⁷ Turner, et.al.1993:7

⁸ Cf. Bates, 1983; McCann, 1987; Pausewang, 1990; Turner, et.al. 1993; Commins, et.al. 1986; Aredo, 1995; and McCann, 1995.

recent years merited the attention of scholars⁹ the history of agriculture has been attempted and with considerable success¹⁰. The numerous studies on rural development and the predicaments of rural society¹¹ are of great relevance for the reconstruction of a narrative that combines the spatial (the entire country) and the temporal dimensions of Ethiopia's performance during the 20th century. There is a considerable amount of literature on the political history of the country¹². But it is important to note here that the political historiography of the country is highly contested by several ethno-nationalist organisations¹³. So far and to my knowledge there are no research initiatives to bridge this polarised positions within the historiography of modern Ethiopia. The economic history of the country with the emphasis on early decades of the 20th century has been covered as well¹⁴. Fortunately, we have a number of studies on societies on the periphery (minorities and pastoral communities) the inclusion into the investigation of the socio-economic history of the region could enrich the outcome of the study¹⁵

There are, moreover, several good studies on important aspects of the agrarian and rural sector covering short period or regions¹⁶. Two insights come out from these studies; namely, the continuous decline of the capacity of the rural population to increase production¹⁷, and the progressive impoverishment of the rural population¹⁸. Moreover, there is a growing literature on decentralisation and democratisation as strategies that might prove useful in confronting the crisis of the sector. The survey of the state of research strongly suggests that there is a considerable amount of specialised research on the social, economic, political and even cultural aspects of Ethiopia State and society during the 20th century. But there are many other aspects that are not yet systematically covered. Moreover, we lack a study or a series of studies that bring together the specialised and dispersed research within the framework of the performance of the Ethiopian State and society as regards food production.

⁹ Desalegn, 1994; Crummey, 2000; Ståhl, 1974; Desalegn, 1984.

¹⁰ McCann, 1995

¹¹ Pausewang, 1990; 1994; Cohen, 1987

¹² Marcus, 1992; Bahru, 1991; Clapham, 1987; Tiruneh, 1993; Henze, 2001

¹³ Sorenson, 1998; Asafa, 1987

¹⁴ Pankhurst, 1961; Shiferaw, 1975

¹⁵ Abbink, Triulzi, 1981, Donhue, 1999

¹⁶ Ege, 1997; Pausewang, et.al.1994; Desalegn, 1994

¹⁷ Cf Clapham, 1998:242

¹⁸ Pankhurst, Helen, 1992: 82; McCann, 1987:34; Desalegn, 1994

Research plan and preliminary results

The research project has four parts. The first three parts are central to the objectives of the research, whereas, the fourth part is a by-product.

The first part of the research project would answer the reasons why Ethiopia has failed to achieve self-sufficiency in food production. This issue would be confronted in collaboration with as many twelve Ethiopian colleagues most of whom have extensive backgrounds and experience in the disciplines of geography, political science, sociology, history, political economy, development research, agricultural economics and farming systems. The result of the historical enquiry (with a preliminary title: *Lost Opportunities or Structural Constraints: Ethiopia's socio-economic history*) would be reported in the form of a book to be published by Nordic Africa Institute in co-operation with Addis Ababa University.

The second part of the research project is an edited volume on reflections about Ethiopia and its society during the 20th century. There are a number of non-Ethiopian scholars and development aid experts who have devoted greater parts of their professional lives studying Ethiopia and its struggle for survival development. Each author would be asked to reflect on the opportunities lost and or structural/cultural etc. constraints that Ethiopia went through during the 1900-2000 period. The edited volume: *Reflections on Ethiopia* shall be designed to answer the second objective of the research project, namely the strengthening of the culture of policy formation. It is important to stress that the issue of sustainable development is a global concern, and, therefore, such edited works ought to be designed to broaden the space of dialogue between Ethiopia and the Donor community. Jon Abbink (University of Leiden), Sandro Triulzi (University of Naples) and the undersigned will edit the book on Reflections on Ethiopia during the 20th century.

The third part is a summary of the two reports. The summary with a provisional title of *Themes societal survival and development* need not be more than 120 pages and shall be designed to disseminate the result of the research project to a wider public. The summary report shall be translated into Amharic for even wider distribution and

dissemination in the country. What is requested from SAREC is a fund to cover the costs of translation and printing.

The fourth part is *a multidisciplinary Reader on Ethiopia and its socio-economic history*. In the course of carrying out the research I shall be reading widely on many aspects of Ethiopian society. Moreover, the colleagues with whom I shall collaborate will further advise on appropriate literature. As Ethiopia continues to expand higher education throughout the country there is a great need for such a reader, and the multidisciplinary reader is primarily aimed at College students. At present there are about 30 000 students attending the institutions of higher education. The *Reader* does not replace college textbooks rather it is complement to those in use. The *Reader* could also be of interest to the donor community in the country. What is requested from SAREC is a modest publishing support. It should be possible to provide the *Reader* at a price that is manageable by the students through wide information campaign for prior purchase. The *Reader* shall be published by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and the funds generated by the sale shall be donated to the Society of Friends of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

Research co-operation and capacity building inputs

This research project is fully supported by Addis Ababa University. As Ethiopia enters the third millennium in 2007, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies have just launched a comprehensive research project under the title Centennial Project Studies. The objective of Centennial Project studies is to assess and reflect on the 20th century as Ethiopia and Ethiopians have experienced it. In this context, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, as can be seen from the letter of recommendation, has judged this research project as timely and relevant. This project is also supported by Alemaya University; as an important input in its capacity-building programmes.

This project has a strong capacity-building input. I shall spend a total of twelve months (4 months every year) in Ethiopia where I shall be actively involved in the postgraduate programme run by the History Department. I shall also make several visits to Alemaya to lecture and supervise MA students.

References

- Asafa Jalata**, ed., 1998. *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse*. New Jersey: Red Sea Press.
- Befecadu Degefe and Berhanu Nega**, 2000. *Annual Report on the Ethiopian Economy*. Addis Ababa: The Ethiopian Economic Association.
- Bekele, Shiferaw**, ed., 1975. *An Economic History of Ethiopia*. Vol. 1: The Imperial Period, 1941-74.
- Castells, Manuel**, 1996 [2000]. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Chabal, Patrick and Jean-Pascal Daloz**, 1999. *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Clapham, Christopher**, 1988. *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, M. John**, 1987. *Integrated Rural Development. The Ethiopian Experience and the Debate*. Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies.
- Crummey, Donald**, 2000. *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia. From the thirteenth Century to the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: James Currey.
- De Soto, Hernando**, 2000. *The Mystery of Capital*. New York: Basic Books.
- Harbeson, John W.** 1988. *The Ethiopian Transformation: the Quest for the Post-Imperial State*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Held, David and Anthony, McGrew**, eds., 2000. *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalisation Debate*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Henze, B. Paul**. 2000. *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia*. London: Hirst and Company.
- Hoben, Allan**, 1973. *Land Tenure among the Amhara: The Dynamics of cognatic Descent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Holcomb, Bonnie K and Sisai Ibssa**, 1990. *The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Colonial Dependent state in Northeast Africa*. Trenton N.J: Red Sea Press.
- Keller, Edmond J.** 1988. *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From empire to People's Republic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- McCann, James**, 1995. *People of the Plow: An Agricultural History of Ethiopia, 1800-1990*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- McCann, James**, 1987. *From Poverty to Famine in Northwest Ethiopia: a rural History, 1900-1935*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- McClellan, Charles**, 1988. *State Transformation and national Integration: Gedeo and the Ethiopian empire, 1895-1935*. East Lansing, Michigan: African Studies Center, Michigan State University.
- Mengisteab, Kidane**, 1990. *Ethiopia: Failure of Land Reform and Agricultural Crisis*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Ottaway, Marina**, ed., 1990. *The Political Economy of Ethiopia*. New York – London: Praeger.
- Pankhurst, Richard**, 1991. *Social History of Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies.
- Pankhurst, Helen**, 1992. *Gender, Development and Identity. An Ethiopian Study*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books.
- Pausewang, Siegfried**, 1983. *Peasants, Land and Society: A Social History of Land Reform in Ethiopia*. Munich: Weltforum Verlag.
- Pausewang, Siegfried, Fantu Cheru, Stefan Brune and Eshetu Chole**, eds., 1990. *Ethiopia: Rural Development Options*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books.
- Rahmato, Desalegn**, 1975. *Peasant Agriculture under the Old Regime*, in Bekele, Shiferaw, ed.,
- Rahmato, Desalegn**, ed., 1994. *Land Tenure and Land Policy in Ethiopia after the Derg*. Proceedings of the Second Workshop of the Land Tenure Project. Trondheim: Centre for Environment and Development.
- Ståhl, Michael**, 1974. *Ethiopia: Political Contradictions in Agricultural Development*. Uppsala: Publications of the Political Science Association.
- Tareke, Gebru**, 1991. *Ethiopia, Power and Protest: Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tiruneh, Andargatchew** 1993. *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-1987. A transformation from an Aristocratic to a totalitarian autocracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turner, B.L., Goran Hyden and Robert Kates**, eds., 1993. *Population and Agricultural Change in Africa*. Gainesville: University press of Florida.
- Webb, Patrick and Joachim von Braun**, 1994. *Famine and Food Security in Ethiopia. Lessons from Africa*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.

Wolde Mariam, Mesfin 1986. Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia, 1958-1977. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Wolde Mariam, Mesfin, 1991. Suffering under God's environment: A vertical Study of the Predicament of Peasants in North-Central Ethiopia. Berne: African Mountain association and Geographica Bernensia.

Zegeye, Abebe and Siegfried Pausewang, 1994. Ethiopia in Change. Peasantry, Nationalism and Democracy. London and New York: British Academic Press.

Zewde, Bahru, 2000. *A Century of Ethiopian Historiography*, in Journal of Ethiopian Studies, vol. 33:2.

Budget