

## Documenting Communal Land Rights: understanding the use and management of communal land in the highland regions of Ethiopia

This paper is based on a study conducted by the Land Investment for Transformation (LIFT) programme to better understand the tenure security of communal land in the highland regions of Ethiopia where LIFT works. The study was intended as an initial scoping exercise preceding more detailed work, and sought to recommend possible areas for further research, highlighting any current policy or evidence gaps.

This paper will explore how communal land in the four LIFT regions<sup>1</sup> is used (and by whom), which institutions, at kebele, woreda and regional levels, are responsible for the management of communal land, and what impact land registration has on communal land use and access.

### The LIFT Programme

LIFT is a Government of Ethiopia (GoE) and DFID supported programme which seeks to improve the incomes of the rural poor in Ethiopia and boost economic growth by increasing the security of land tenure for farmers. Under LIFT, a process of second level land certification (SLLC) has been developed, which grants rightful landholders certificates of land holding and use, through a process of systematic land registration. In addition to registering land held privately by individuals or households, the programme also identifies, demarcates and records communally held land. As such, the LIFT programme wants to assess what impact, if any, the registration process is having on individuals and households who use communal land.

The study included a literature review, in-country interviews and a data-analysis exercise. Data from 12 woredas where registration has been completed was analysed to assess the coverage, size and use of communal land across the four regions.

### Communal Land Use in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia's Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation, No. 456/2005, communal holdings are described as rural land which is given by the government to local communities for common grazing, forestry or other social services. All rural land, whether individually or jointly held, will receive a certificate describing the land's characteristics including location, size, fertility and use, in addition to the rights and obligations of the holder or holders. All rural land in Ethiopia is ultimately owned by the State, and communal land holdings can be changed to private holdings at the government's discretion.

On average, communal land accounted for 18.2% of the land area sample representing a small, but significant, proportion. Parcel counts for communal land were much lower than those of non-communal land, with communal parcels tending to be much larger than non-communal ones.

Communal land in the sample was used mostly for rainfed annual cropping, followed closely by bare land, grazing land, natural forest and woodland/shrubland. This is in keeping with typical rural livelihoods in Ethiopia, which normally centre around cultivation, grazing and collection of forest products. Like communal land, the dominant use for non-communal land was also found to be rainfed agriculture, although to a much higher degree. The data shows that communal land has a much more diverse range of uses than non-communal land, suggesting that other uses, besides cultivation, are a critical contribution to land user's livelihood portfolios.

The study also identified communal land being used by landless youth groups for agricultural purposes as a growing trend, which is consistent with the high proportion of communal land being used for cultivation. This demonstrates the important livelihood opportunity communal land can provide and the need to retain communal lands' diverse range of uses.

---

<sup>1</sup> Amhara, Oromia, SNNPR and Tigray

### Management of Communal Land

Responsibilities for governing communal land are shared among federal, regional, woreda, kebele and sub-kebele institutions. While oversight is provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land Administration and Use Directorate (at the federal level) and Bureau of Agriculture or Regional Council (at regional levels), day to day responsibility for communal land is concentrated at the kebele and sub-kebele levels, with some oversight from woreda institutions.

With growing populations and increasing pressures for land in the highlands, disputes do occur, particularly from encroachment of private holdings onto communal land. The SLLC process was cited as helpful in clarifying rights and minimising disputes of this nature. In addition to clarifying land rights, the study recommends using the SLLC process and rural land administration system developed under LIFT to assist in communal land management and planning.

### Changes in Communal Land Use

One of the perceived benefits of receiving SLLC's for private land is that it can help incentivise landholders to use land more productively, and under LIFT several SLLC-linked financial products and services have been created. Currently, these products are not available for communal land. However, the study was still interested in assessing whether SLLC would change the way communal land is used. Communal land users interviewed as part of the study claimed that tenure security was the biggest benefit from SLLC, particularly from encroachment. While they confirmed that land use changes do occur (for example previous grazing land being used for agricultural purposes) they did not think this was driven or influenced by SLLC. In the cases reviewed, communal grazing land which was converted to agricultural land retained its communal classification, and its use would be reviewed by the community after the lease period. Thus, while it might be too early to say whether the issuance of SLLC's changes the way people use communal land, the process has the potential to make future changes more transparent. It would be useful for LIFT to work with the Kebele Land Administration and Use Committees, and sub-kebele organisations to build their capacity for better planning and management of communal resources, using the information provided by SLLC and RLAS as a tool.

Furthermore, although the study did speak to communal land users, the sample size was not sufficient to provide a detailed impression of farmers perceptions of SLLC. It is therefore recommended that LIFT undertake further assessments to determine any supporting initiatives which can be introduced to support and protect vulnerable groups' use of communal resources and provide further training to field teams to ensure procedures and messages are tailored appropriately around communal as well as non-communal land.