Svein Ege (Ed.)


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This book builds on ethnographic studies in selected sites in the Amhara Region in Ethiopia from the 1980s up to 2010. Svein Ege, a historian, is the editor of the book and the sole author of five out of nine chapters, and co-authors one chapter with Yigremedaw Adal. The other major contributor is Harald Aspen, an anthropologist, who is the sole author of the remaining three chapters. Kjell Havnevik has written a postface to the book, placing it into the broader context of peasant agriculture in Africa. It is the ethnographic case studies in the book that I find most valuable. The literature review in chapter two is highly incomplete and results in some sloppy general judgements of some of the relevant literature.

For me as a development economist who has worked on land-related issues in Ethiopia for more than 25 years, this book is an interesting read. Since some of my works also have been referred to in the book, and the works of economists (like me) in general and on land tenure issues in Ethiopia in particular are commented upon in the book, I see this as a good opportunity to contrast our views and hopefully clarify some misunderstandings. Before that I will provide a description of some of the book’s general characteristics.

I was already familiar with Svein Ege’s insightful study of the 1997 land redistribution reform in the Amhara region. I, myself, was doing fieldwork in North Shewa in the period 1994-1999 and experienced how the reform was used to punish those who had been community leaders under the Derg (military) regime. The land redistribution policy is an issue central to the whole book and I am somewhat puzzled that Ege spends so much time emphasising that it was less widespread, uniform and important in creating tenure insecurity than some seem to think. My studies in the four regions of Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and SNNP taught me that there was a large local variation in tenure insecurity and the extent to which land redistribution was practised. This also implied that there were large variations in local demands for policy changes that could enhance tenure security, such as
land registration and certification. Our 1998 survey of 16 communities in the Tigray highlands, just before land registration and certification was implemented, revealed that more than 50% of the households feared they would lose land in future land redistributions even though the recent land proclamation of 1997 stated that there would be no further redistribution of land. Many of those who did not fear losing land expected to gain from future land redistributions (Hagos and Holden 2002). In the same communities and households that we surveyed repeatedly (six times) in the period 1998–2015, we found that land registration and certification enhanced tenure security (Holden et al. 2011a; 2013).

In our surveys in Southern Ethiopia we also found great variations in tenure insecurity and whether redistributions of land had taken place. Such decisions were apparently made at the kebele level and depended on local demands (the availability of land for landless and near-landless persons). This heterogeneity also implies a variation in local demand for land registration and certification and how it may affect tenure security.

However, here is another source of tenure insecurity about which the book is largely ignorant: unclear plot borders and related ownership disputes among neighbours. Our studies and interviews of local conflict mediators, community land administration committees, and records in district courts revealed that land border disputes were the most common type of dispute before land registration and certification, and that such disputes were substantially reduced as a result of the reform (Holden et al. 2011b; 2016). I therefore think the authors underestimate the importance of tenure insecurity and fears of land redistribution that continue to play central roles in the rapid economic transformations taking place in the country.

Svein Ege characterises peasant land rights as «conditional private land rights». I have called them restricted individual rights with obligations. There is not only a right to cultivate and use the land, but also an obligation to do so because unused land can be seized (without compensation) and redistributed to somebody else in need of land. The constitution states that the land is owned by the state and its people and I therefore think that Ege overstates the degree to which these rights can be characterised as private individual rights. Up until very recently, certified land could not be sold or mortgaged according to the law. Still, the law cannot hinder market forces and illegal (disguised) land sales.

It is rather surprising that the authors, after first having been critical of the importance of land markets, become so uncritically in favour of introducing land sales markets when looking at the need for future tenure reforms towards the end of the book. My own studies of peasants’ preferences and perceptions regarding the introduction of sales markets for land in many sites in Tigray, Oromia and SNNP in the period 2007–2012 revealed that the great majority in all locations were still against opening up for land sales, and since we got many critical responses to other policy questions, I am sure that this was not out of respect towards existing policies (Holden and Bezu 2016; Holden et al. 2016). The authors seem to have quite naïve views of the importance of private property rights to land as a means to create economic development. There are several advantages of having a strong state with strong control over property rights in order to facilitate rapid urbanisation and urban planning. It is surprising that no parallels are made with the development in China, where the land-right systems are quite similar and is a good example of how strong economic growth without strong private property rights to land can be achieved.

The authors claim that compensation is only given for investments on the land when land is expropriated. However, the expropriation and compensation laws and the way they are practised imply that compensation is also paid for the agricultural production value of land equal to seven years of production, or that those losing the land are given alternative
plots based on their constitutional rights to land as residents in a community. This is, however, very far from perceived as an acceptable level of compensation by those affected, who view the value of their land to be much higher, and increasingly so over time (Holden and Bezu 2016).

I also need to address one misunderstanding regarding my own work that the authors linked to funding from powerful and well-endowed institutions like the World Bank and IFPRI (p.29–30). Most of our fieldwork has been carried out based on funding from the Research Council of Norway and our NORAD-funded capacity-building programs, and through collaboration with the Environment for Development (EfD) network based at the University of Gothenburg. In contrast to the authors of this book, most of my research has been carried out in close collaboration with my Ethiopian (ex-)PhD students and collaborators. This close collaboration has facilitated deeper understanding and many valuable in-depth qualitative interviews in the field.

I also need to address a couple of misunderstandings on how we applied development economists work when we do fieldwork. On p. 32, Ege writes that «the methodological choices made have taken the economists in another direction (than anthropologists) and deprived them of the local knowledge needed to interpret the data». Contrary to Ege’s assumption, it is highly important for development economists to establish causal relations and thereby understand the whys and hows in our research. Both theory and methods are used to achieve this. When I carry out quantitative surveys, I always combine them with qualitative interviews with different types of stakeholders, and this is done in close collaboration with native-speaking Ethiopian (ex-)students and collaborators. Cautious interpretation of the data and careful assessment of data quality is vital to the work we do. Both internal and external validity assessments are crucial. However, our discipline does not allow room for as much descriptive analysis in our published papers in economics journals, and such information therefore tends to be available only in working papers and reports. A couple of the references attached here are examples of such reports, but there are many more studies that have been ignored by the authors; there is a much richer literature on land tenure issues in Ethiopia than the impression the book gives. In particular, the First Stage and Second Stage land registration and certification reforms during the period 1998–2019 are not even distinguished in this book.

Overall, I would say that I have learnt a lot from reading anthropological studies. It is unfortunate that the editor of this book has learnt so little from reading economists’ works on land tenure issues in Ethiopia – he could learn a few more things if he were willing to invest the time to read more of our studies.

References


