

Knowledge, power and politics: the environmental policy-making process in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Policy discourses urging environmental rehabilitation, and rapid agricultural intensification for food self-sufficiency are firmly entrenched in Ethiopia. This paper examines the actor-networks and key policy spaces associated with the establishment of these discourses, taking natural resource management policies, and institutionalisation of the SG-2000 extension programme as case studies. An emergent, and potentially challenging, participatory natural resource management discourse is also identified. Contrasting the regions of Tigray and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), the paper concludes by arguing that, with decentralisation, differences between regional administrative and political cultures are key to policy processes, affecting the degree to which central policies reflect local concerns.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with how policies surrounding agriculture, natural resources and the environment get established in the Ethiopian context. Policy can be seen to be linked to three core processes – agenda setting, decision-making and implementation. In many accounts of the policy process the links between these three stages are firmly linear, with each stage distinct. Hence, reality is analysed, problems are identified, alternative solutions are evaluated, decisions are taken by those who are competent (experts) and have responsibility (representative politicians). And, finally, the arising decisions are implemented. In this paper, however, we present a rather more complex

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picture of the policy process. Our analysis sees policy-making as a diverse, diffuse, complicated activity, where sometimes competing, sometimes overlapping policy positions are presented by a range of different groupings of actors, including scientists, administrators, NGO personnel, government officials, rural people and politicians. Policies, the paper argues, are culturally embedded, and understanding how national and sub-national political and administrative histories and practices shape policy processes is key. Policies can be seen to rise and fall in prominence as a result of the interplay between context specific circumstances and the changing effectiveness of different networks of actors in the policy debate. Our analysis of environmental policy debates, therefore, suggests a very different type of process from a simple, linear and technical process.

Our focus is the range of debates that have emerged in Ethiopia over recent decades surrounding three core questions regularly posed by policy analysts. First, what can be done to increase food production in a country prone to substantial food deficits and with a rapidly increasing population? Second, what can be done to ameliorate the progressive degradation of natural resources? And third, what can be done to promote effective participatory management of natural resources by rural communities? Linked to these questions, three broad policy discourses can be identified. These are a Green Revolution discourse, an Environmental Rehabilitation discourse, and an emergent participatory natural resource management discourse.

These three discourses are intertwined within the contemporary policy debate in Ethiopia, but it is also the case that they start from different premises and so can provoke serious conflicts over policy in terms of decisions, laws, programmes and actual implementation practice. For example, conflicts may arise over strategies for environmental rehabilitation, with some arguing that large, mass mobilisation schemes are the only way to address the long-term challenge of combatting soil erosion, while others feel that increasing farmers' incentives to invest on their own land is more important. Similarly, some regard the promotion of Green Revolution technologies in the marginal areas of the country as the only way of boosting food production and so solving the recurrent food crises; some, on the other hand, think that more integrated, low external input solutions based on the principles of conservation agriculture are more appropriate ways of dealing with the dual problems of environmental degradation and food shortage in the longer term. These are controversial issues in debates about environment and rural development in Ethiopia. The aim of this

paper, however, is not to provide a technical analysis of these policy debates, nor a comprehensive review of their historical origins (for which, see Pausewang *et al.* 1990; Abebe & Pausewang 1994). Rather the objective is to identify the types of knowledge about natural resources from which these policy conflicts emerge, and explore how particular positions get established in (and others excluded from) the policy debate, and how, once established, such positions get challenged and transformed.

Below we will examine the nature and evolution of these policy debates in some detail. Before exploring the particularities of the Ethiopian debate, however, it is necessary to introduce some of the conceptual terminology that we will employ in the subsequent analysis. In the next section, therefore, the way policy discourses, actor-networks and policy space interact in getting policy positions established is examined (see Parsons 1995; Hill 1997; Jasanoff & Wynne 1997; Keeley & Scoones 1999).

HOW POLICIES GET ESTABLISHED: POLICY DISCOURSES, ACTOR-NETWORKS AND POLICY SPACE

Opposing policy positions are an upshot of different assumptions and different worldviews. The central questions are how particular positions become established in the first place, how their relative influences change, and how they become realised in policy.

Identifying that policies reflect different elements or combinations of *discourses* is one way of explaining the nature and origins of policy conflicts.¹ Discourses are a product of institutional practices and individual activities that reflect particular types of knowledge (Hajer 1995). They are actively produced through the agency of human actors, who by undertaking certain practices, and by describing the world in certain ways, create a discourse. However, actors do not exist in a vacuum. Discourses simultaneously have a structuring capability, by providing the parameters within which people act and shaping the way actors influence the world around them.

In terms of how discourses are articulated in policy, it is possible to identify *networks of actors* who, through their actions, promote and establish particular discourses (see Callon & Latour 1981; Callon 1986; Latour 1987). These networks are the mechanisms through which knowledge becomes practice. What joins the network together is a sharing of some common values and outlooks. Networks are generally

informal, and actors may not think consciously about their links with other actors. More often, however, actors in a network consciously strategise to promote their shared worldview, and target potential allies in key institutions or positions of influence. These processes of enrollment increase the strength and effectiveness of the network and ultimately extend the reach and influence of the favoured discourse.

Policy can be understood as formal decisions, laws and programmes and actual practice – what is often labelled implementation (cf. Juma & Clark 1995). Actor-networks are able to establish discourses in actual policy by taking advantage of *policy space* (Grindle & Thomas 1991). The idea of policy space complements the actor-network approach since it helps us to think about why actor-networks become influential at particular moments, and to look at how discourses change, and rise and fall in historical context.

Policy space as a concept helps explain why some policy and institutional changes are successfully formulated and implemented in some situations but not in others. Grindle and Thomas (1991) argue that policy elites have agency to control the *timing* and *content* of policy reforms and so increase prospects for their success within certain parameters. These background factors include *context* (economic, social, political, bureaucratic and international), *circumstances* (whether they face a crisis or politics-as-usual situation) and *personal influences* (such as experience, training and ideology).² Policy elites do make history but not entirely in circumstances of their own choosing.³

UNDERSTANDING POLICY PROCESSES IN ETHIOPIA

In this paper we argue that actor-networks take advantage of different degrees of policy space to establish and uphold different discourses about agriculture and natural resource management in Ethiopia. Our analysis is based on on-going fieldwork on the policy process in Ethiopia,⁴ involving interviews with a wide range of policy actors, and the analysis of a range of documentary sources. In piecing together and interpreting a diverse range of information, we have made use of the theoretical concepts introduced above to make sense of past patterns and emerging trends. Our overall aim has been to gain better insights into the complexities of the policy process in the Ethiopian context, with the hope that, through this, strategies for enhancing policy analysis and implementation can be identified.

To date, over sixty semi-structured, informal interviews have been carried out with federal ministry or agency officials, regional bureau

staff, research scientists, consultants, NGO workers and bi-lateral donors.⁵ Interviews took a variety of forms, but focused on identifying definitions of and ways of framing key agricultural and environmental problems; listing the key sources of information supporting such arguments; exploring the range of people who are linked together in supporting such a position; and examining in detail the particular, personalised histories and interpretations of the evolution of particular policies. Interviews have been complemented by an examination of key written sources – often identified as important by interviewees. Such sources have included newsletters, newspaper articles, consultancy reports, funding documents, project proposals and research articles.

Subsequent sections of this paper discuss the results of this on-going work. First, the basic characteristics and recent history of the Green Revolution and Environmental Rehabilitation discourses are laid out, highlighting how arguments are framed, the role of science and expertise, and what key circumstances, contexts or personal influences have been influential in establishing the discourse in the Ethiopian policy debate at particular times. Next, the paper examines how these discourses became established and subsequently transformed through an examination of the multiple actor-networks linked to different policy positions. An analysis of the evolution of these policy debates highlights the importance of policy space arising at key moments, allowing particular policies to become dominant. It is clear that the dominant discourses surrounding agriculture and natural resource management are not monolithic, and are subject to change. In this regard, the influence on the dominant approaches of the emerging participation discourse is explored in the following sections, with the analysis highlighting, in particular, the increasingly apparent regional differences in the way actor-networks are formed and policy space created. The concluding section of the paper reflects on the changing nature of the environmental policy process in Ethiopia.

COMPETING DISCOURSES: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES POLICY DEBATE IN ETHIOPIA

While this paper does not attempt to provide a comprehensive guide to recent Ethiopian history, or to debates about Ethiopian political culture, it is necessary to set the following discussion of policy change in context. In 1974 the emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown in a

coup by the Derg, which established a Marxist military government led by Mengistu Haile Mariam. This Soviet supported regime carried out a radical land reform ending the landlordism associated with the imperial system. Agriculture was closely managed through state control of prices, input supply and marketing. Parallel to this, the regime sought to transform rural life through large-scale plans for resettlement and villagisation. Some liberalisation followed in the late 1980s, as Soviet support collapsed. The long-running insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigray in the north of the country intensified in this period, and the Derg was eventually toppled in 1991. Following a period of transitional government, elections were held consolidating the power of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). A new constitution enshrined the principles of democracy and 'ethnic federalism', and the country was administratively restructured around ethnically based regions, which were to reflect the ethnic complexity of Ethiopia, and to counter long traditions of centralised government.

Despite these apparently profound changes – from imperial, to Marxist-military, to democratic regime – there have been many continuities (see Clapham 1988; Ottaway 1990; Andargachew 1993; Young 1997). The first of these is that the country has been repeatedly affected by famines, with particularly marked crises in 1973–4, 1984–5 and 1991, and that these have had political repercussions, and have made concern over food production and food self-sufficiency pre-occupations of all regimes. Second, a number of characteristics of the Ethiopian state have remained remarkably persistent over time: these include a tendency towards authoritarianism, hierarchy, centralised rule and lack of transparency. For Levine (1965) deference to hierarchy and equivocation, rather than directness of speech, are hallmarks of Abyssinian (Tigrayan and Amharan, but not all Ethiopian) culture. These traits arguably translate into bureaucratic cultures that are antithetical to bottom-up or decentralised practices and to reflexivity and learning. These points should be borne in mind when trying to understand why top-down approaches to agricultural extension and natural resource management have been so prevalent.

It is also significant that Ethiopia has always been dominated by the Abyssinian north. Southern regions have never been politically dominant, and indeed were largely only incorporated into the Ethiopian state at the same time as the European 'scramble for Africa'.⁶ With the exception of several small kingdoms, the south does not have the long traditions of state organisation of the Abyssinian

north. As part of Ethiopia, these areas have consistently lacked resources and administrative capacity. This regional diversity, we shall argue, along with the broader points above, has important implications for the political embedding and transformation of discourse.

A green revolution in Ethiopia?

The challenges of national food production have long been a policy concern in Ethiopia. One of the central aims of the large-scale integrated rural development projects that dominated the Ethiopian rural development scene from the late 1960s, was increasing yields through the supply of new crop varieties and inorganic fertilisers. The Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU) project was the first and most prominent of these efforts, started with much fanfare in 1967 and run with Swedish support for eight years (Dejene 1990; Cohen 1987).

This was followed by similar programmes, such as WADU in Wolayta, which ran until the early 1980s with support from the World Bank. Extensive research efforts, starting in the mid-1960s, by the Ethiopian (then Imperial) Institute of Agricultural Research and FAO, focused on testing fertilisers with a range of key crops in different parts of the country. The result was a Minimum Package Programme which was launched by the government in 1971. In various guises,⁷ a package approach, linking the supply of external inputs (seeds and fertiliser) to a credit programme, has been the centre-piece of the Ministry of Agriculture's extension programme since then.

The narrative associated with this policy stance is very familiar, drawing on the arguments used in support of the Green Revolution in Asia. Growing populations and declining per capita food production, it is argued, will result in major food gaps which must be filled by boosting aggregate food grain production. Off-the-shelf modern technologies are available, it is stated, which could achieve this, if only they were properly extended to the farming population. Resistance to change, however, is due to traditional agricultural practices, inappropriate tenure and the lack of a commercial outlook. A radical transformation of existing farming systems, the argument goes, is therefore required.

Over the years such a position has been put forward, in particular, by the technical scientific elite, who demonstrate on their research stations and in their laboratories the real potentials of adopting such a modern, efficient approach to farming in Ethiopia. This argument is

supported by economists looking at the agricultural sector, who, making use of available macro-data, demonstrate the likelihood of growing, significant food gaps, and the economic costs of filling these.

Since the fall of the Derg regime and the take-over by the EPRDF in 1991, these arguments have been reinforced by strong political statements about the need for food self-sufficiency in the country. The arrival of the Sasakawa-Global 2000 programme in the country in 1993 was a particularly significant moment. Having been accorded a very high profile by political leaders, and supported by an extensive media campaign, the programme became highly influential within the upper echelons of government, and well known among the general population. With its expansion as part of the new extension policy in 1995, the SG-2000 seed-fertiliser-credit package became firmly established at the centre of the new government's approach to agricultural development across the country, reinforcing the long line of such approaches in Ethiopia. The speed at which the programme has grown is remarkable: from 32,046 farmers in 1995, to 600,632 in 1997, and 2.5 million in 1998. The plan for 1999 was to have 4 million farmers involved (Howard *et al.* 1998).

An 'aggressive technology transfer' approach (cf. Borlaug & Dowswell 1995), typified by SG-2000, has become central to a number of key policy documents, most notably the government's Food Security Strategy (FDRE 1996:16).⁸ This document has now become the template for the development of regional strategies and for discussion with donors. The World Bank, also, has invested extensively since 1991 in technology transfer in the seed and fertiliser sectors through two major projects, the National Seed Systems Development Project and the National Fertiliser Project (World Bank 1995a, 1995b).

Environmental crisis, environmental rehabilitation

Alongside the policy debate around food security and agricultural production, has been a recurrent concern about the natural resource base upon which agriculture depends. Soils, in particular, have featured prominently. Again, the generalised Malthusian narrative is very familiar. With growing populations, resource depletion is accelerating, it is argued, resulting in widespread deforestation, overgrazing, biodiversity loss, soil erosion and soil fertility decline. With continued environmental degradation, the argument continues, agricultural production will decline, food deficits will increase and poverty and starvation will result. In order to prevent such calamity,

the familiar collection of natural resource projects are suggested as solutions – woodlots, hillside closures, terracing, bunding and so on.

While this summary is of course a caricature, many policy statements from government, NGOs and donors alike carry a similar message. The recently published Environmental Policy of Ethiopia (FDRE 1997), for instance, states:

Renewable natural resources...have now deteriorated to a low level of productivity...In 1990, accelerated soil erosion caused a progressive annual loss in grain production estimated at about 40,000 tonnes, which unless arrested will reach about 170,000 tonnes by 2010...In economic terms, soil erosion in 1990 was estimated to have cost (in 1985 prices) nearly Birr 40 million in lost agricultural production. (FDRE 1997: 1)

In our interviews, a similar story-line was regularly told. For example, a senior manager in the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) commented: ‘Land degradation and soil conservation are the number one environmental problems in Ethiopia.’ These positions are echoed at regional level. Thus the Regional Conservation Strategy currently being prepared for the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Region (SNNPR) comments:

Nowadays environmental issues have attracted the attention of the public. Dense forests which were once filled by various tree species are now filled by sand dunes...Furthermore the loss of vegetative cover has in turn led to the destruction of wild animals and the loss of organic chemicals which play an important role in maintaining the fertility of the soil. These phenomena coupled with population pressure and overgrazing have finally become the main sources of the environmental degradation we presently observe. (SNNPR forthcoming, II.13)

Similarly the standard solutions are listed in the targets for the Five Year Plan of Tigray National Regional State (Berhane 1995) as: construction of stone/soil bunds to conserve about 696,000 hectares; biological conservation measures on a bund of 105 kms; gully treatment measures on 4,500 kms; and the planting of 435 million forest seedlings.

Sources of authority for such a narrative are drawn from natural scientists, and particularly the extensive work carried out on soils and soil erosion in Ethiopia. In interviews two key sources of information are regularly mentioned. First, the results of the Soil Conservation Research Project (SCRIP), a national network of research sites collecting data on soil erosion established by Hans Hurni in 1981;⁹ and second, the report of the Ethiopian Highland Reclamation Study (EHRS), published in several volumes in 1986 by FAO (FAO 1986).¹⁰ A range of key data and statements were produced from this research

which have entered the policy debate. For example, soil loss figures extrapolated from SCRP plot data are regularly quoted as evidence for major soil loss; the EHRS and the National Conservation Strategy Phase I report (Wood & Ståhl 1989), each significant and influential statements on the state of the Ethiopian environment, both make use of this data.¹¹ In addition, a suite of standard technical solutions were widely promoted through the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources following the publication of the manual for development agents in 1986 (Hurni 1986).

Following the major famine of 1984 and the publication of the EHRS which explicitly linked the famine to natural resource degradation, the building of physical soil conservation measures became central to the widespread food-for-work efforts supported by the World Food Programme and others (Maxwell & Belshaw 1990). For some, this became the perfect 'win-win' solution to the food crisis in Ethiopia – food aid could be supplied to fill the gap, at the same time as soil erosion control measures were built which would, in the long term, increase food production sustainability (Maxwell 1993).

Thus, since the late 1960s – from the Haile Selassie era through the Derg regime to the present government – two dominant narratives have influenced the agriculture and natural resource debate in Ethiopia. Each has been associated with particular events, linked to particular scientific studies, and supported by different interest groups and (sometimes) different government ministries or external donors. However, despite the contrasts between the Green Revolution and Environmental Rehabilitation discourses, in many respects they are quite similar, derived as they are from a Malthusian diagnosis of over-population and impending crisis. Over the last thirty years, they have offered different yet complementary solutions, with different elements of each discourse being prominent in the policy debate at different times. A Green Revolution approach, for example, dominated discussion in the 1970s, and, with SG-2000, a similar policy stance returned in the early 1990s. Environmental issues rose to prominence in the 1980s with concerns over soil erosion, and have been kept on the policy agenda into the 1990s, in part through continued international debate surrounding the Rio conference in 1992, and follow-up initiatives such as the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) signed by the Ethiopian government in 1994.

A number of important questions about the policy process arise from this brief review. How did these discourses get established within the Ethiopian policy apparatus? Which actors in what networks were

involved? What were the links to international debates? What were the key events and circumstances resulting in shifts in policy? What bureaucratic and political factors influenced policy change? It is to these questions that we now turn.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF POLICY DEBATES IN ETHIOPIA:
ACTOR-NETWORKS AND POLICY SPACE

The green revolution debate: the case of Sasakawa-Global 2000

The post-1991 re-emergence of a strong Green Revolution discourse can be traced to a number of factors. As already discussed, since the late 1960s, the agricultural bureaucracy and scientific establishment has had a general orientation towards Green Revolution approaches, reinforced by personal influences derived from educational and training experiences. Despite major changes in personnel since 1991, these have been key contextual referents in terms of the construction of recent policy space. However, specific circumstances have also been important in promoting the Green Revolution position. These include the arrival of a government which strongly prioritised food self-sufficiency as a policy issue, bringing with it a long commitment to such a stance from the days of the liberation war.

The new government, and the prime minister in particular, has invested substantial political capital in promising to 'cross the divide' to food self-sufficiency, and was therefore highly responsive to the proposals of the SG-2000 programme. Policy space opened up significantly with the relatively good rainfall in the years up to 1995, allowing for the successful demonstration of the potential for improved yields under the new package programme in a wide range of demonstration sites across the country. The year 1995, described by one commentator as the 'lotto year', was particularly significant, as, due to the success of the harvest in some parts of the country, the government was able to announce that it was actually exporting food.

According to many observers, an essential moment in the establishment of a strong actor-network around this issue was a visit during 1994 to a SG-2000 demonstration site by the prime minister, Meles Zenawi, accompanied by the Nobel laureate and strong advocate of the Green Revolution approach, Norman Borlaug, and ex-president of the United States, Jimmy Carter. One commentator we interviewed noted:

Food self-sufficiency at any cost is the number one priority for the present government. SG-2000 came in with off-the-shelf packages, and maize yields

increased ten-fold. It was sellable. They found it extremely attractive. Carter came and saw before the harvest. Now it's the government's pet project. On the radio, morning and afternoon it's – extension, extension, extension. But if it fails it will be bad. Moving from famine to exporting food is very important politically.

In 1994, the SG-2000 programme became incorporated into the official National Extension Policy and became an inviolable policy priority for the government. Space for alternative actor-networks to discuss extension critically in public was drastically curtailed according to other informants. To quote an official in a bilateral donor agency: 'it's the one policy we can't do anything about'.

The World Bank appears to be a key participant in the actor network associated with the post-1991 Green Revolution policy position. Earlier support for the Minimum Package Projects and substantial investment in the seed and fertiliser sector made the Bank an obvious ally. As the original author of the government's Food Security Strategy produced in 1996, a World Bank consultant emphasised the importance of a technological strategy involving elements of the SG-2000 approach (FDRE 1996). Similarly in a 1997 World Bank report on agricultural growth in Ethiopia, the same consultant again makes explicit reference to the SG-2000 initiative:

The most important way to increase food availability in Ethiopia is to increase yields, which for cereals are among the lowest in the world. A 'package' program supported by Sasakawa-Global 2000 initiative, in which improved cultivation practices, seeds, and fertilisers are used by farmers, has demonstrated the possibilities for substantial yield increases in three basic food crops. (World Bank 1997)

Close ties between the SG-2000 network and influential elements in the Bank are further suggested by contributions made by Edward Jaycox (former World Bank vice-president for Africa) in the SG-2000 promotional film: 'Ethiopia: My Hope, My Future.' SG-2000's ties with the Ethiopian government can be traced through many workshops, reports and interviews. For example the editorial in a recent SG-2000 newsletter observes:

The government of Meles Zenawi deserves due credit for identifying agriculture as the engine of change, for seizing the opportunity of the SG-2000 initiative, and for launching an expanded and ambitious agricultural extension agenda, and backing it up with significant resource commitment and unreserved attention. (Sasakawa Africa Association 1998: 2)

How did the network become so influential? When we asked a representative in a bilateral donor agency to explain the influence of

SG-2000, he observed: 'Firstly it's the Carter link and then there are the technologists – Borlaug himself, Bob Havener, John Coulter. They've all retired from the CG system [Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research] and have now arrived back as consultants through the revolving door.' Most commentators concur that this combination of top-level political support and the mobilisation of internationally credible scientific expertise, together with support from the World Bank, has been highly successful in creating a strong and effective actor-network.

In the last couple of years, the actor-network has expanded yet further, with a new emphasis on enrolling actors in the private sector, and linking this to donor interest in supporting public–private partnerships. For instance, a new initiative – the Agribusiness Forum – held its first meeting in 1997. This was convened by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and SG-2000 country director, Marco Quinones, and chaired by Jimmy Carter. The meeting 'brought together key ministers and senior advisors concerned with economic development, foreign investment, and agriculture; senior representatives of the World Bank; the United States; SG-2000; and five major multinational companies involved in agribusinesses in Ethiopia – Cargill, Monsanto, Novartis, Pioneer Hi-Bred International, and Hydro-Agri'. The aim was 'to develop stronger partnerships among public, private, and non-governmental organisations to promote the delivery to farmers of productivity-enhancing new production technology', and to look at 'what organisations such as the World Bank, USAID, and European development agencies could do to promote increased private investment in the region' (Sasakawa Africa Association 1998: 12–14).

The environmental debate: the case of soil conservation

Policy space for the Environmental Rehabilitation discourse was strongest in the years following the 1984 famine. Although before this there had been a history of food-for-work conservation measures, especially following the 1973 famine, these really took off from the mid-1980s. As already noted, the EHRS was highly influential and undoubtedly crucial to the establishment of a donor, government and NGO actor-network pressing for a high profile environmental rehabilitation campaign. For instance, one informant who had been involved in senior positions both in government and outside since this time confirmed the importance of this study: 'The Ethiopian Highlands Reclamation Study has been very influential throughout my career. I

refer to it time and again. Also the Soil Conservation Research Project...’ Similarly, a recent document for the World Bank-led Soil Fertility Initiative produced by consultants from the FAO Investment Centre comments: ‘Although it [the EHRS] is more than ten years old, the study represents the most comprehensive examination of the many aspects of problems of soil conservation’ (World Bank 1998: 8).

Over the last ten years, a number of critical commentators have questioned the assumptions used in this and related studies on environmental issues in Ethiopia (e.g. Hoben 1996; McCann 1995, 1998; Herweg 1993; Bojö & Cassells 1995). Yet despite rather fundamental questions being raised about the accuracy of the data used to support the environmental crisis narrative and its response, the Environmental Rehabilitation policy approach, the central policy argument has remained. When discussing this issue, a senior official working on environmental issues with the government admitted the flaws in the data, but insisted the basic arguments for the policy stance are not undermined:

We use the earlier narratives again and again, although there is a lack of scientific research substantiating these. For example, there are figures claiming that forty per cent of the country was covered by forest and now it's 2.7%. We are building policy on that. But now people are saying that it is not the case, forest cover was as scant then as now. Again data on per hectare loss of soil needs substantiating. But in general terms the trends are there.

Despite challenges, then, the dominant environmental crisis narrative has remained resilient, and at the centre of the policy discussion in Ethiopia since the mid-1980s.¹² We have to look beyond the technical arguments about soil loss or deforestation rates to broader political questions, and the nature and extent of the actor-networks associated with the Environmental Rehabilitation discourse, in order to see how, in the face of increasing and apparently convincing contradictory evidence, the dominant policy stance was maintained so concretely.

In the 1980s and into the 1990s, the continued threat of famine offered a particularly opportune policy space through which the environmental discourse was established at the centre of rural development policy. In the 1980s, a strong and influential actor-network emerged involving sections of government, a range of international NGOs who arrived in the country *en masse* during and after 1984, and donors keen to off-load food aid and under pressure from international and domestic constituencies to do something about the environment. For Western donors, providing food aid to a Marxist government was politically difficult, and the ability to link relief to

addressing an environmental crisis was a fortuitous opening, providing a politically acceptable solution (Hoben 1996). For the UN organisation set up to administer food aid, WFP, the stakes were high due to the politics of food aid. Programme 2488 turned out to be one of the largest food aid programmes in history. A consultant working in Ethiopia during this period put it to us that ‘the future of the WFP depended on the success of Programme 2488’.

During this period, huge conservation works were constructed using food-for-work, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources proudly publicised its achievements in terms of the numbers of terraces and bunds built and the area of hillsides closed, declaring a strong ‘conservation agriculture’ policy position, with strategies of environmental rehabilitation at its centre (Hultin 1989; Ståhl 1992). Terraces were a clear symbol of the presence and authority of the state in rural areas. They should also be seen as being of a piece in key respects with the concurrent villagisation and resettlement policies: ostensibly technical interventions reordering rural social space and livelihoods.

In the years following the 1984 famine, the Environmental Rehabilitation discourse and actor-network remained well established, with many soil conservation initiatives being carried out with donor support. Then, in the final years of the Derg regime, this was reinforced with the establishment of a National Conservation Secretariat with plans to develop a National Conservation Strategy (NCS). The Phase One document certainly reflects the core concern of addressing an environmental crisis, and makes extensive use of the earlier work of the SCRIP and the EHRS to highlight soil erosion and soil fertility decline as particularly pressing environmental issues:

Improved management is vital given the present trends in environmental degradation. These suggest that soil loss on arable land exceeds formation by a factor of six, and that wood is being used at twice the replacement rate. Unless major changes in management of natural resources occur, complete deforestation will occur by 2025 and the land unable to support agriculture because of soil erosion will increase to some 10 million hectares by 2010. During the next thirty years it is predicted that crop yields will decline by 1–3% per annum and droughts will have more severe impacts. With the population set to double in less than 25 years these trends could well intensify. (Wood & Ståhl 1989: 3)

With support from the World Conservation Union (IUCN), and a series of external consultants, the NCS process became well established in the country. Phase I ran between 1989 and 1990 and aimed to identify key issues with IUCN advice and assistance. Phase II developed a five volume strategy including policy and institutional

frameworks and action and investment plans. Initially located in the Office of the National Committee for Central Planning, the NCS was later moved to the short-lived Ministry of Natural Resources Development and Environmental Protection (Kifle Lemma *et al.* 1998 : 28). The status of environmental issues on the Ethiopian policy agenda was raised further with the high profile process leading up to and following the UNCED conference in Rio in 1992. In response to this, an Environmental Protection Agency was created in 1994. This is a parastatal organisation which reports directly to the prime minister's office, and has been the focal point for the development of the new environmental policy, and now houses both the NCS secretariat and the office for follow-up work associated with the CCD.¹³

Although the close association between soil conservation and food aid has declined in more recent times, the prominence of the soil conservation debate remains. This is reflected in a wide range of documents, from the national and regional conservation strategies, to the federal government's environmental policy and the recent Food Security Strategy (TGE 1994; FDRE 1996, 1997; SNNPR forthcoming). Since the 1980s, though, both the policy space and, to some degree, the actor-networks associated with the soil conservation and environment debate have changed. In the 1980s, the threat of famine and the political circumstances that donors found themselves in created a particular opportunity for a soil conservation agenda to be pushed. By the 1990s, circumstances had changed, and new spaces had opened up. This was a result of a combination of changes in political conditions and the explosion in the international debate about environment in the 1990s, and with this, the increasing interest of donors in environmental issues.

Through this period, the actor-network associated with the environmental debate has reconfigured to some extent. There are, of course, elements of continuity – the continued importance of the SCRP, and particularly Hans Hurni's influence, along with the EHRS report, for instance, has already been mentioned. The NGOs remain interested in soil conservation, but today soil conservation is less linked to food relief, and more to the rehabilitation and development focus of their projects. In government, soil conservation remains a significant element of agricultural policy, and a soil conservation 'package' is currently being developed as part of the new extension policy.¹⁴ However, with the restructuring of government departments, Soil and Water Conservation is now a team within the Natural Resources department, arguably making it less prominent in the main line

ministry. Some argue also that the creation of the EPA as a separate parastatal, without direct line functions and with a limited budget, has weakened the influence of conservationists in the agriculture ministry. They cite the prominence of the Green Revolution stance, and the SG-2000 programme in particular, as an example of how the ministry has abandoned its conservation agriculture stance, which they argue was the hallmark of the 1980s. But, as will be discussed below, with regionalisation following the EPRDF take-over in 1991, different patterns are evident in different parts of the country, and, today, it is often the policy space and actor networks at a regional level which are key in explaining the ascendancy or decline of a particular policy position.

UNDERSTANDING POLICY CHANGE: THE CASE OF THE EMERGING PARTICIPATION AGENDA

So far we have explored how the two dominant policy discourses – Green Revolution and Environmental Rehabilitation – and their associated actor-networks, became established in the Ethiopian policy debate. But policy positions are not monolithic and static, nor are actor-networks immutable and constant. Things change. New policy spaces emerge and new actor-networks are formed, which make use of new knowledges to create new narratives and discourses about policy issues. This section therefore examines how certain policies have changed, through an exploration of the emergence of what might be termed a participatory agricultural and natural resource management position.

Those arguing for such a position situate a discussion of agricultural production and environmental conservation within an understanding of rural livelihoods, arguing that technical solutions to either food shortage or environmental degradation have not worked. They argue, instead, that solutions must be based on a detailed understanding of local contexts, drawing on indigenous knowledge and technical practices. Integrated solutions are favoured, including a focus on linking agricultural production with conservation and encouraging the management of watersheds through community involvement. Top-down solutions and large campaign-style approaches are therefore rejected in favour of more participatory solutions, involving local consultation and village level planning.

In the last few years, in particular, arguments of this sort have become increasingly influential, and their impact on the discourses can

begin to be discerned. This section, therefore, attempts to trace the influence of this emerging discourse on agricultural and natural resource management policy debates in Ethiopia, identifying how and why the previously dominant discourses have come under scrutiny, and examining how old actor-networks have unravelled and new ones have formed.

Shifts in environmental thinking, for instance, can easily be seen through a look at documents from different periods. Compare, for example, the difference in tone between these extracts: one from the EHRS and the other from the NCS ten years later:

Each PA should have 70 hectares reforested with eucalyptus, and a further 10 hectares with other species, totalling 1.6 million hectares by 2010...to provide breathing space for reclamation...considerably more than 150,000 persons will need to be resettled or preferably migrate annually... (Constable & Belshaw 1985: 21)

and

Given the reported reluctance of some farmers to construct physical conservation works in some areas, through a programme of farmer participatory research, determine for specific agroecological zones the relative efficiencies and economic advantages of physical and biological soil conservation systems to determine the biological or physical measures most suitable for conservation. (NCS 1994: 58)¹⁵

Similarly, a more participatory stance has recently been advocated by the Ministry of Agriculture with the launch of its Participatory Agricultural Demonstration and Extension Training System: 'Unlike the top-down extension method of the past, demonstration in PADETES is designed to ensure farmers' participation. The farmers are involved in all stages of activities, from planning to evaluation' (*Ethiopian Herald*, 11 April 1998: 8).¹⁶ During the early 1990s, in particular, elements of the Environmental Rehabilitation discourse began to change, with a softening of approach, and an increasing emphasis on consultation and participation. A number of events contributed to this. During the overthrow of the Derg, and in the period soon afterwards, the extensive destruction of conservation measures, perceived as top-down and inappropriate, was seen as a sign of major public discontent with the previous policy (Dessalegn 1994). In discussions, senior officials involved in promoting the Environmental Rehabilitation policy under the Derg regime admitted they were shocked at the extent and vehemence of this reaction.

The change in the environmental debate was reflected upon in an

interview with a senior manager in the EPA. There is a distinctive view that command and control is no longer an option for environmental policy:

The outcome of policy cannot be an institution that looks after the environment by implementing activities – it will clash and won't work. The EPA has a low-level profile so it is not threatening. With the environment the only way it can work is through consensus. Enterprises should be regulated by law; for everything else it is a question of awareness raising and consensus building.

The CCD illustrates this again. While still framing the problem in terms of mounting land degradation and impending crisis, officials associated with the CCD make much of process and participation when talking about their work. The aim is clearly not to replicate the large-scale rehabilitation programmes of the 1980s; rather the talk is of 'awareness raising' and building projects from the 'bottom-up'. A senior manager within the EPA commented:

It is an iterative process: technocrats have systems for dealing with information that peasants don't have, but there is also information that peasants have that they don't. So we try to maximise participation. It is important that local land users go along with what others want to do. Because you can't have police looking at the backs of each peasant farmer in the country.

Changing patterns of aid in the 1990s also curtailed much of the policy space previously associated with an Environmental Rehabilitation position. A former senior official in the Ministry of Natural Resources noted the shift away from a conservation approach towards a more productionist stance, associated with the Green Revolution position: 'Much less soil conservation is done today because by and large food aid has been cut off. Instead, there has been a shift to being fanatical about dams, and small-scale irrigation regardless of feasibility... it's an obsession.' This is reflected in comments made by members of the donor community. One bilateral donor official commented:

Soil erosion is still there at the top of the agenda. But it is more modest, now that it is clear that the WFP [World Food Programme] soil conservation programmes achieved little... Now we must link this to agriculture and growing food, as part of the regional food security strategies.

In the 1990s, then, while still recognised as important, the top-down soil conservation approaches of the 1980s have lost credibility, and the debate has shifted towards a more participatory approach to natural resource management. Yet, as discussed earlier, at exactly the same time, a top-down, technician and productionist stance, framed in terms

of 'aggressive technology transfer', has been promoted for the agricultural sector. By all accounts, in the early years of this programme, there was not much room for participation and debate.

However, as with the Environmental Rehabilitation discourse, challenges have increasingly emerged to the Green Revolution stance. Following the successful harvests and subsequent export of grain in 1995, the results of demonstration trials and the level of credit repayment have not been as high as expected in many parts of the country (Howard *et al.* 1998). While the advocates of the programme continue to quote the impressive statistics of 1995, and the evident success stories of the higher potential zones, the story elsewhere is clearly less rosy. For a number of years, the rumours and discontent accumulated. Given the political profile of the project in the country, public criticism was rare, but doubts began to take hold. By 1998, however, some officials in the Ministry of Agriculture were beginning to qualify the SG-2000 success story with a range of caveats. For example, one senior official described the current direction thus:

We want to go for a more sustainable approach. Not necessarily maximum yield, but optimum. We want an integrative extension system, with multi-purpose extension agents. We are now adding soil conservation – both physical and biological – agroforestry and watershed management to our crop package. It's a land husbandry management approach. We are doing pilots now in three regions, based on sound land-use planning at household and village level. We want something concrete to convince the policy-makers in the PM's office, as we did with the crop package five years ago.

As part of this reassessment a number of additions to the Green Revolution position were being added. A convergence with the emerging participatory, consultative approach to environmental issues can be detected. In discussions with both regional and federal officials, a new emphasis on efforts to boost agricultural production in the context of integrated watershed management can be seen, alongside a stated commitment to involve farmers in agricultural development activities, including an appreciation of their own knowledge and technology.

Given the forcefulness and apparent belligerence of the Green Revolution approach only a few years before, this emerging new approach is perhaps surprising. In addition to the widespread witnessing of failure in many areas of the SG-2000 package, what other factors have contributed to the fracturing of the hard-line Green Revolution discourse and the emergence of a more participatory stance, converging with the environmental management debate? To

answer this, it will be important to ask: what networks are being built around participatory approaches? What influence are these having? And, in turn, what policy spaces are emerging?

In relation to both dominant discourses, there are some key events that have provided opportunities for a challenge to the dominant positions, allowing new policy spaces to open up and new actor-networks to be formed. The emergence of the participatory policy stance, in relation to both agriculture and environment, can be traced, in part, to such events. Clearly the overthrow of the Derg and the arrival of a new government, offering the prospects of peace, security and democracy, helped to strengthen the purchase of participation arguments in some quarters. At the same time, there is growing awareness of successful participatory NGO projects, the organisation of national and regional meetings on participatory approaches and the initiation of extensive training and networking in Ethiopia, combined with the increasing emphasis on participation in the international development literature and the need to couch applications to donors in participatory language. Undoubtedly, too, acts of 'foot-dragging' or overt resistance by farmers, such as low credit repayment rates, and destruction of conservation measures, are a key and underexplored part of the story.

A clear actor-network associated with a participatory approach in Ethiopia is, however, not obvious. A number of NGOs and their coalitions have been important, as have the funding of various training and capacity building projects by donors. The mobility of staff between government, NGOs and donor agencies and projects has perhaps facilitated the flow of ideas, but has made this process diffuse and difficult to track.

As with our earlier discussion of the establishment of other discourses, a similar set of practical actions are evident – workshops, field days, demonstrations, case studies and so on have all been important opportunities for enrolling new actors into networks. A number of NGO workers, committed to a participatory approach, commented that getting sceptics in government to experience field realities through exposure training or visits was really key in creating a constituency. Links to international actors have also been important. Donor support to experimental participatory projects has been significant, as have collaborative links to international research activities.¹⁷ Such links in the actor-network have, commentators argue, been important in establishing credibility in a setting where the mainstream has been unconvinced and suspicious.

In terms of influencing policy-makers, an NGO director articulated a specific strategy: 'We don't go for politicians. We go for individuals who can influence politicians.' The distinction between 'political' and 'technical' people is interesting. The strategy is to win senior technical people over to your worldview and then leave them to make the arguments with 'politicians' where high-level political issues impinge, and where, particularly today, NGOs are on difficult terrain. These technical people can also work within the bureaucracy where policies are implemented to change culture and practice.

As we have seen in this section, previously secure policy positions are potentially vulnerable to challenge, adaptation and change. Tight, well-integrated actor networks, drawing on particular discourses about environment and development, may unravel if contexts and circumstances change. In the case of the emergence of a participatory perspective to natural resource management, this has been a fairly gradual process, with in-roads into the dominant position being made through new networks of NGOs, working together with colleagues within government and with the support of a variety of international actors, from the research and donor communities. But, as we have seen, a number of key events helped precipitate such change. With such changed contexts, the presentation of alternative perspectives gains more purchase: new 'facts' are built, supported by new networks of actors and reinforced by the practical witnessing of other field realities.

Policy change is thus not straightforward, based on a rational choice between alternative options. Instead, any understanding of policy change requires looking at the complex interactions between knowledge, power and political process. Such interactions are, of course, dependent on contexts; in the Ethiopian setting, the regional context is an increasingly significant factor. A discussion of the contrasts in policy process in two different regions, then, will be the subject of the next section.

REGIONALISATION AND POLICY-MAKING: THE CONTRASTING CASES OF TIGRAY AND SNNPR

Following regionalisation, the relationship between national and regional policy debates has become increasingly significant. In many areas, the federal level has become less important, and it is in the regions that policy agendas are set, decisions taken and projects implemented. A bilateral aid official commented: 'No one knows what the federal ministries' role is now. They have no exact function.'

Indeed he commented that they had no working relations with the federal level and that they had only visited the Ministry of Agriculture once on a courtesy visit. Another donor official made a similar point when asked how they tried to influence policy: 'Forget the federal level – go down to the regional level.'

In this section, we explore the contrasting cases of Tigray and SNNPR, looking at how regional players, both within government and outside, have responded to, interpreted and acted upon the wider discourses discussed in the earlier sections of this paper. What is clear from this analysis is that the regional context increasingly matters, in some cases offering more room for manoeuvre, and the opportunity to reinterpret and transform policies coming from the centre for the local context. In other cases, by contrast, political and bureaucratic constraints appear to limit such opportunities, resulting in less flexibility and fewer attempts at local adaptation of centrally derived policies.

Tigray is a case where there appears to have been considerable reorientation of federal policies. In discussions with a range of officials, a number of significant events were mentioned which have suggested substantial shifts of agricultural and natural resource policies originating at the centre. In Tigray, much of the debate in the last few years has revolved around the SG-2000 project and the new extension policy. The failure of many of the demonstrations during 1996 was witnessed during field visits by bureau officials, members of the regional council, NGO project staff and others. At these occasions, informants told us, farmers spoke out, and highlighted the pros and cons of the approach with great clarity. Exposure to experiences further afield has also been influential in suggesting new approaches. Both a senior official in the Bureau of Agriculture and a senior administrator in Mekelle University College talked enthusiastically of a field trip with regional and federal level officials to India and China to look at alternative approaches to watershed management, and a subsequent meeting where these issues were discussed with senior Ministry officials. According to the bureau official, the integrated watershed approach: 'taught us to be integrated and interdisciplinary. To develop water harvesting systems, and to find ways of linking feed, fuel and soil fertility, and to put far less emphasis on terraces.' New perspectives on a more integrated, conservation farming approach for the non-irrigated areas of Tigray, based on principles of watershed management, have therefore emerged. A local actor-network has been built around a collaborative research project, linking the University College with the Institute of Agricultural Research and the Tigray Bureau of Agriculture, which explicitly sets

out to test alternatives to the SG-2000 approach. One of the participants in this research observed:

With SG-2000, high rainfall years encouraged unwarranted optimism, whereas with low rainfall there is high risk of such packages. In our research we want to look at three *woredas* (districts) on a watershed basis... to see how farmers can go with alternatives to Global 2000... There could be alternatives. A multitude of alternatives.

There appears to have been a major re-evaluation within Tigray as a result of these experiences. An Agriculture Bureau official recalled:

We have good experience from the Derg time, when everything was about high-potential areas. What we have realised is that equity is crucial – if households are dependent on others then that is not good... We don't believe those areas are degraded and agriculture is over. We have seen great potential in drought-prone areas.

However, this picture of dynamic debate, local research, and the emergence of distinct regional policy discourses, associated with strong, well-established actor networks, is not evident everywhere in Ethiopia. In SNNPR, for example, informants gave a rather different picture. Here, despite plenty of off-the-record criticism, there is little open debate about the nature of agricultural or natural resource policy. A rather draconian, top-down stance is often seen, with apparently little room for the participatory approaches noted elsewhere. One observer commented: 'At the moment SG-2000 farmers are put in prison for being unable to repay credit when the rains fail.' In contrast to the situation in Tigray, the agricultural bureaucracy appears to operate with a much more rigid style, where: '*Woredas* compete with each other to say so many farmers have voluntarily joined in [the SG-2000 programme]. They are actually under pressure to force farmers. The *woreda* council puts pressure on the *woreda* Bureau of Agriculture and they pressurise DAs.' An administrator within the Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Rehabilitation Commission discussed interventions at the local level in the following terms:

Before we start we discuss – we elaborate why irrigation is the major solution. This and other issues will be briefed to them [the peasants]. Then they accept the necessity of their participation. After negotiation we have our own structure to mobilise the community. At the grassroots level regional coordinating committees – others will participate in activities. First we convince them, then they accept, then we mobilise them. There is a labour mobilisation department here.

What are the explanations for these apparently rather stark differences in outlook and approach to policy? In discussions of the regional

characteristics of the policy process, informants highlighted a number of factors which they argued influenced the way things worked in different places. A number of interrelated issues were regularly highlighted in these conversations.

The regional political context is clearly highly significant. In Tigray, a certain self-confidence is evident, which is reflected in the eagerness to present a distinct Tigrayan position. The political space to do this is, of course, dependent on the close connections between regional political actors – both politicians and influential bureaucrats – and the ruling party. A number of members of the regional council and bureau chiefs, for instance, are members of the EPRDF ruling council, and were previously key players in the TPLF. In SNNPR, by contrast, such connections are absent. The regional council and government bureaucracy is made up of representatives of a wide range of ethnic groupings, from across an enormously diverse region. Although appointees of the central government and party exist, they do not necessarily have privileged access to the federal level, nor do they have the necessary political connections. Indeed, a distinct lack of confidence is exhibited, reflecting perhaps an insecure and uncertain political positioning.

Young, in a recent review of the regionalisation experience in Ethiopia, comments on the dilemmas of both imposed governance in SNNPR and the inherently weak capacity for policy-making and administration as follows:

The first administrations [after 1991] were military-dominated and made up solely of Tigrayans; only later were southern Ethiopians captured during the war given political training and quickly made to assume administrative and 'elected' positions. It is indicative of the TPLF's need to control the political process that it did not build alliances with the few southern parties which existed at the time and instead has carried out a campaign of harassment against them. The result is that, unlike their counterparts in Tigray, cadres selected to administer the south typically have low levels of education, frequently appear to be motivated by opportunism and not surprisingly have questionable legitimacy among their constituents. Weak leadership gives rise to accusations of theft, bribery and incompetence, and these charges are given at least some credence by the frequent changes and short tenures in office of many leading officials in the region. (Young 1998: 198)

The impact of mechanisms adopted for bureaucratic control – and in particular the *gim gima* evaluation system – were also pointed to by informants as a key factor differentiating regional experience. The *gim gima* evaluation system evolved during the liberation war by the TPLF as a way of encouraging both discipline and transparency. Since 1991,

this approach has been incorporated into the government bureaucratic system. Every official is subject to a six-monthly review, when any person may outline their criticisms of performance in a public hearing (see Young 1996, 1997: 203–4). Advocates of the system argue that it encourages openness, reduces corruption and increases people's motivation and performance. Critics point to the political control of the system and the way hearings are far from transparent, and often involve serious intimidation. Such critics also point to the way the system encourages conformity and reduces the incentives to innovate and challenge the status quo.¹⁸ In Tigray, the *gim gima* system has a tradition stretching back over twenty years, and has become well established and reasonably widely accepted (although critics are still evident). In such a setting, more of the positive elements of the system may be seen. By contrast, in other regions, this is seen as an imposed system, and one which is associated with intimidation and political control. In such settings, more of the negative elements are evident, with the consequence that, due to fear of negative evaluation, criticism and debate of policy is stifled, and bureaucratic inertia and a lack of local initiative often the result.

Another issue many point to is the contrasting levels of staff capacity within government across regions. Under the regionalisation policy, government bureaux and departments are encouraged to employ people from that region. For some regions, where long exposure to higher education and other training opportunities has been available, the recruitment of competent staff is not a problem. Despite the war, many Tigrayans received such education; by contrast in SNNPR, far fewer were able to take advantage of such opportunities during the Derg regime and before, with the result that the technical capacity for policy development and implementation differs widely across the two regions.

Finally, informants note that differing experiences of participation and local governance may also be important in explaining the contrasts across regions. In SNNPR, ever since the invasion by Emperor Menilek in the late 1800s, the area has been ruled by the centre, first by the imperial regime, and then by the Derg. Many argue too that, despite the talk of regionalisation and local autonomy, the current government has similar centrist tendencies. Given these historical precedents, and the widely held perception of the current regime, there has been little experience of locally based forms of governance, based on participation and 'bottom-up' processes. Indeed, exactly the opposite. In Tigray, by contrast, people comment with evident pride on the tradition of

people's participation developed during the liberation war. The history of the TPLF working closely with local populations in liberated areas appears to have left an embeddedness within society, which means that the new regional government is concerned to combine firm government and mobilisation with sensitivity to local concerns. One observer noted the importance of:

A sense of continued dialogue, which is taken up as a culture by the people, if there is a good initiative by the community then the will and commitment is there... All policy ideas have to be discussed at the grassroots level. Ideas from the top have to be discussed and endorsed. This is policy formulation.

A confidence about the potential to make policy locally is stated, something which was not apparent in commentaries in SNNPR. An official in the Bureau of Agriculture argued:

We don't accept whatever package comes down. It has to be appropriate. Ideas can come down from this bureau or that bureau, and also from representatives of farmers. After these debates a consensus is taken. The bureau sums up and a package is decided...if further study is needed to substantiate an ad-hoc task force may be set up to produce findings and recommendations.

Officials argue that a participatory approach is central to their style. But this does not take a liberal, populist form; there are greater resonances with the early Maoist 'mass line' approach, a connection which dates back to the ideological beginnings of the TPLF in the 1970s (Young 1997). Informants describe such a participatory model as a process whereby the government listens through the *baito* system,¹⁹ 'takes a consensus', makes a decision and then conscientises and mobilises the people around the issue.

Regional context, therefore, appears to be particularly important in understanding policy processes in Ethiopia. As we have shown, a range of factors contribute to the differences, including political histories and settings, mechanisms of bureaucratic control, levels of capacity in government, and commitments to participatory forms of governance. Exploring such contextual factors, and their relationship with the centre, is therefore key in understanding policy processes.



As the previous sections have highlighted, the policy process linked to agriculture, natural resources and environment in Ethiopia is undoubtedly complex. Policy conflicts are not resolved, it seems, as a result of simple, technical, rational choices between different alter-

natives. Policy is the stuff of politics and people, of knowledge and power. The rise or fall of different policy emphases is dependent on the successful (or otherwise) enrollment of actors – scientists, donors, politicians, NGO staff, farmers and others – and the creation of networks which are able to make use of a policy space, emerging as a result of particular contexts, circumstances and timings. Policies can be seen to be embedded in local settings – in the political histories of different regions, in the cultures of regional bureaucracies and administrations, dependent on the histories of educational advantage and disadvantage, and rooted in ideologies and practices of governance and participation.

Policies, it seems, often have a certain inertia: particular ideas and practices stick, despite concerted challenges to basic concepts and practices being made. If actor-networks are tightly formed and impenetrable, and contexts and circumstances are not conducive to change, no amount of rational argument will budge a policy from its pedestal. However, as we have noted, things do change. Once distinct and well-guarded policy positions begin to fall apart, other arguments become incorporated, softening the stance and, through this process, enlarging the associated actor-network. Key events may allow this to happen, creating new policy spaces, and new opportunities for challenge and open debate. The result is often the partial unravelling of old actor-networks and the creation of new ones, around alternative policy discourses which, previously, featured only on the fringes of mainstream policy discussion.

Those in the development business who are fond of speaking of ‘enhancing the policy environment’ through investing in ‘improving information flows for policy’ or ‘encouraging policy-relevant research’ or ‘building policy research and analysis capacity’ need to take note of the complexities of the policy process in different country (and regional) settings. Such interventions often assume that policy arises through a relatively simple combination of better knowledge bases, more expertise and improved administrative procedures. Certainly in the Ethiopian case (and in many other cases too), this is not obviously so. It is our view that an improved understanding of the nature and context of the policy process should help to get a more realistic grip on what policy is and how it changes, in turn enhancing the likelihood of more effective and appropriate interventions.

NOTES

¹ Recent research in environmental politics seeks to explore links between political and social theory, and the extent to which discourses reflect political interests while similarly structuring interests, and actors' perceptions of interests (see, for example, Hajer 1995).

² While acknowledging the importance of 'structure', the importance of 'agency' is also noted (cf. Giddens 1984 on structuration). The emphasis on agency explicitly takes explanations of the policy process beyond some of the more deterministic models of traditional political science, such as those that see policy simply as reflecting alternative class, social, state or bureaucratic interests.

³ A limitation of Grindle and Thomas' theory is its exclusive emphasis on policy elites. Non-elites clearly play key roles in policy change, either through often unperceived non-compliance (Scott 1985), or more overt resistance (Gebru Tareke 1991). While we do not provide a thorough analysis here of the political activity of the Ethiopian peasantry, we do suggest that at key moments the often dispersed micro-level activities of rural populations have been key components of policy processes.

⁴ The research reported in this paper was largely carried out during April 1998 and in April 1999.

⁵ Excerpts from interviews are reported anonymously in this paper.

⁶ See Donham and James (1986). Bahru Zewde defines 'southern Ethiopia' as 'a convenient category embracing those states and peoples which did not directly engage in or were peripheral to the imperial politics of Gondar' (1991:16). Menilek's feat, he asserts, was to unify these areas and the northern highlands. Others, however, would frame the period of expansion between the 1880s and 1900 as the incorporation of these areas into the Ethiopian empire (Donham 1986:3).

⁷ For example, PADEP, funded by donors such as the World Bank and EU from 1988, divided the country into eight agroecological zones and aimed to devise appropriate research and extension packages for each. In the end, however, resources were heavily concentrated on high-potential areas (Belshaw 1990; World Bank 1990: 76).

⁸ The Food Security Strategy was published in 1996. Donors are currently negotiating the funding and implementation of Regional Food Security Strategies. For a critique of the national strategy, see Masefield (1997). The strategy's approach is: 'To increase food production as quickly as possible, the strategy focuses on the diffusion of simple technology packages, off the shelf, within smallholder areas of reliable rainfall' (FDRE 1996:16).

⁹ The SCRP is 'the national body with the mandate to conduct research in Ethiopia with reference to land degradation' and is supported by the Group for Environment and Development at the University of Bern (www.giub.unibe.ch/cde/projects/scrp.htm). Set up in 1981, the SCRP had seven research sites; it closed down in 1997 and was reviewed in 1998.

¹⁰ The Ethiopian Highlands Reclamation Study began in 1983. It was funded by the World Bank and was carried out by a team of international and Ethiopian specialists under FAO. Although the full report was never formally ratified – in common with many other strategy documents – a summary document was published in 1986.

¹¹ For example, the NCS report quotes Hurni (1988) in stating that 'average soil loss from arable land is appropriately six times the rate of soil formation. The net result is a reduction in soil depth by 4 mm per year' (Wood & Ståhl 1989: 14). For a recent reiteration of the Hurni figures see Bekele & Holden (1999).

¹² Clapham as early as 1988 comments on the 'extraordinary persistence even of myths that can clearly be shown to be fictitious' and cites the deforestation statistic as an example (1988: xi). More recently decline from 40 per cent to 1 per cent forest cover in forty years has been cited by Al Gore, in his high-profile *Earth in the Balance*, as an example of a particularly serious environmental catastrophe (Gore, 1992; cited in McCann, 1998:1). An environmental consultant commented to us on the persistence of particular problematic data supporting entrenched policy narratives:

'The problem was that the 40% figure gets into circulation and becomes god-given, it gets recycled and accepted. People say it's so and so it must be. I did the same in my work, I used certain data and reconfirmed biases. But you have to build constituencies, how else do you get things on the agenda? You have a job to do in a short time... I had to finish a report in 7 weeks. You accept things at face value and then you question later. You tell a story and you want it to be coherent, if things fit into it you accept them more

- easily. You get the figures to go along with the story to create attention. The EHRS, for example, got information into circulation and became a document to study.
- 13 The NCS is jointly housed by the EPA and the Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation (MEDAC).
- 14 One of the aims of PADETES is 'to ensure the rehabilitation and conservation of the natural resource base of agriculture', principally through biological measures such as 'use of legumes, crop rotations, alley-cropping and use of compost' (*Ethiopian Herald*, 11 April 1998: 6 & 8).
- 15 It should be noted that participation was also emphasised as essential to environmental rehabilitation within the NCS Phase One Report (Wood & Ståhl 1989: 61).
- 16 While PADETES is the result of a 'critical assessment of past extension systems, including the recent effort by Sasakawa Global 2000' it is also presented as a fusion of Training and Visit and SG-2000 approaches (*Ethiopian Herald*, 11 April 1998: 8). How the government will square the circle and make it participatory is as yet far from clear.
- 17 For example, a number of donors have been supporting training in participatory land use planning activities, including UNDP, DFID and others, with links to both government and NGOs. Various consultants and NGO players have also been active in training in participatory techniques, including PRA.
- 18 According to Young (1997: 204): 'civil society in Tigray exerts few controls on the TPLF government and administration, and *gim gima*, even with its dangers of manipulation and human rights abuse, is a powerful weapon of control and accountability in the hands of the people.
- 19 *Baitos* are assemblies at zonal (*zoba*), *woreda* and Peasant Association (*tabia*) levels.

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