

Replacing Pastoralism with Irrigated Agriculture in the Awash Valley, North-Eastern Ethiopia: Counting the Costs

*R. Behnke and C. Kerven, Odessa Centre, UK
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ABSTRACT:

About half of the irrigated land in Ethiopia lies in the Awash Valley. The bulk of this land was once riverine pastures used in the dry season and as a drought refuge by pastoral herds; now it grows primarily cotton and sugar cane. The object of this study is to compare the economic returns derived from devoting the Awash valley to pastoralism versus irrigated cotton or sugar cultivation. The analysis will show that pastoralism is either economically comparable or more advantageous than cotton cultivation. While a well-run private cotton farm can achieve rough productive parity with pastoralism, state cotton farms lost money for decades and are now either abandoned or leased to private farmers. The state's sugar estates are, however, more profitable than its old cotton estates. Whether sugar is also more profitable than livestock production is uncertain, and the answer to this question has immediate practical significance. Pastoralists and farmers along the Awash are currently losing additional land to expanding government-owned sugar plantations.

This analysis documents the remarkable continuity of Ethiopian agricultural development policy for the Awash valley, across nearly half a century and despite radical changes in political regimes. What is now Afar Region was formally annexed to the Abyssinian Empire late in the 19th century. Since the 1960s, irrigation schemes along the Awash have been part of a process of political incorporation and domination, a way for successive central governments to control pastoral resources by putting immigrant Ethiopian highlanders on those resources and by reengineering the environment to provide labouring jobs that accommodated their farming backgrounds – cutting cane and picking cotton. This study quantifies the economic costs and benefits of this incorporation process.

Roy Behnke [roy_behnke@msn.com]