

*Full Length Research Paper*

## Institutions of agricultural land acquisition and transfer: Experience from Central Highland of Ethiopia

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Received 2 January, 2013; Accepted 5 May, 2014

**Access to agricultural land is a matter of life and death among the peasant society. Control over this resource is also the most disputable and contentious aspect of rural setting in Ethiopia which affects the overall socio-economic and welfare status of an individual and a group. This research is an attempt to identify and analyze both formal and informal institutions rendering agricultural land acquisition and transfer in the Central Highland of Ethiopia, using Tole District as a case study. The key findings of the study revealed that the majority of the highland and midland agricultural land scarce households are predominantly acquiring agricultural land through inheritance from their parents followed by donation from relatives, sharecropping, renting-in, local administrations, and acquisition from the combination of these mechanisms. Such social capital was found to be strong for sharing and accessing the land. Thus, interventions and policies need to promote sustainable livelihood of the area, must recognize the role of formal and informal institutions that facilitate land transfer among farming households. This can be achieved through the supply of credits and improved agricultural technologies, and other specific policy instruments. These entail that the best approach is to promote a package of integrated agricultural and non-agricultural livelihood strategies for small landholders.**

**Key words:** Central-highlands, Ethiopia, Tole, land, acquisition, Institutions.

### INTRODUCTION

Agricultural land determines an overall socioeconomic status of an individual or a household in the agrarian society. In other words, agricultural land is the fundamental asset of peasant property and a major source of livelihoods in the rural Ethiopia. According to Teklu (2006), land is one of the major conventional inputs that limit agricultural production and the main source of rural livelihoods since options other than farming are scarce.

Lack or shortage of this resource can trigger a loss of

livelihood characterized by food insecurity, low living standard, inaccessibility to public services (extension services, credit, farm inputs and technologies) and hence inability to uplift oneself from the abject realm of poverty (Grover and Temesgen, 2004; Chambers and Conway, 1992). It can also lead to disputes and tensions. Landless people sometimes attempt to acquire land in 'Guerrilla' system analogous to what Hutter and Hoffmann (2011) used in marketing which often result in disputes and forceful evictions (Ayaleneh and Korf, 2007). In order to

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survive under such scarcity, farmers often engage in formal and informal institution of land sharing and transfer; this is because capable farmers are not passive who voluntarily live under poverty.

Until the 1974 'land to tiller' based slogan of land reform, land distribution was highly unequal (Bereket, 2008). The reform nationalized all land and distributed it to peasants owning use right. The operationalization was undergone until 1977. This reform, to some extent, solved the problem of land based class differentiation (Abebe, 2004). The use right to peasant and state ownership persisted for four decades despite enormous change in political and economic milieus. The reason behind the curtain is that, historically, the issue of land is more of politics and still full of contentions (Crewett and Korf, 2008; Hussien, 2004).

According to research report on land tenure and agricultural development in Ethiopia by Ethiopian Economic Association/Ethiopian Economic Policy Research Institute (EEA/EEPRI), landholding size is less than a hectare for the majority and the land-labor ratio (active labor force) on average is as low as 0.38 hectare in the country. The number of landless farmers is also about one in ten at national level and worse in the highly populous highland areas of Ethiopia (EEA, 2002:34). Like most highlands in the country, Central Highland of Ethiopia has a serious shortage of farmlands and every possible piece of land is put into cultivation. Increasing population density coupled with the lack of alternative employment opportunities led to progressive land pressure and subsequent shrinking of individual landholdings. The scarcity of cultivable land is a serious problem where around half of the studied households accounted for landlessness (EEA, 2002:33). They own landholding size less than a minimum area required for minimum food production. Another study also estimated that 30 to 40% rural active labor forces are either landless or rely on uneconomical size of land and severe in the densely populated highland areas (Teklu, 2003). It was also evidenced that the land to person ratio in the past four decades was sharply declining.

The prevalence of extreme land pressure has already resulted in vast deforestation and cultivation of unsuitable slopes and tremendous social disputes in the study area, causing severe environmental damages and social unrest (Dessalegn, 2009), which make the future prospects of agriculture look bleak without generating either non-agricultural activities or instruments of rewinding the possible hazards (Reta and Ali, 2012). This has both policy and development implications on revitalization of alternative institutional arrangements and viability of such institutions to overcome the prevailing farmland scarcity.

Therefore, there are two sets of rationale underpinning this research project. First, for those peasants who do not have sufficient farmland in the study area, access to agricultural land is paramount critical in order to survive in the farming environment. It could be through formal and

informal institutional arrangements so as to share and transfer agricultural land for the new entrants and landless farmers. Such sharing and transfer mechanisms are underrated by the policymakers and development practitioners despite the intensive research works and policy debates on the importance of agricultural land for the survival of rural livelihood and agricultural development.

Thus, there is a critical need to assess these institutions in the context of increasingly diminishing agricultural land and its potential viabilities and adverse effects on sustainable rural livelihoods in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia. Second, although there are ample studies on rural livelihoods and agricultural land scarcity, little is known, for instance, about the roles of institutions of agricultural land sharing among peasants in general and the study area in particular. With this motivation, this study contributes to policy debates on how to enhance these institutions and to minimize the problem of landlessness or to think an alternative livelihood option to land scarce and landless farmers.

The overall objective of this paper is to identify and analyze local institutions serving agricultural land acquisition and transfer for landless and land scarce farmers in study area. Specifically, it identifies both formal and informal institutions rendering agricultural land acquisition and transfer, and analyzes the outcome of these institutions to resolve the problem.

## **AGRICULTURAL LAND INSTITUTIONS: A LIVELIHOOD PERSPECTIVE**

Rural land is an asset of great importance in Ethiopia. High proportions of income, employment and export earnings stem from agricultural production and other land-based activities. Thus, control of agricultural land is a life and death concern for peasant societies. In the absence of much economic diversifications, access to land and other natural resources is of special importance for improving the livelihoods of poorer groups and providing greater security (Samuel, 2006; EU, 2004).

It is disappointing that the increasing population in the rural areas was absorbed in agriculture through levelling down of holdings, rather than through alternative forms of employment. Regrettably, population growth in Ethiopia could have been supported by rural non-farm employment creation, but this has not happened so young adult people remain in rural areas either unemployed, as landless labourers or as sharecroppers (Samuel, 2006). The peculiar attachment of Ethiopian farmers to their land may have negatively been affecting the mobility of peasants out of farming and subsistence living. This is mainly because of clutters of the institutions of land acquaintance and transfer coupled with absence of attractive non-agricultural employment opportunities like industry and commerce (Deininger et al., 2006).

Moreover, there is a fear and the belief of losing land if the farmer engages in non-farm activities. Besides, rural-urban movement as a strategy is discouraged by state. Still, rural people could not find alternative means of livelihoods (Solomon and Mansberger, 2003).

Despite rural land is covertly shared and transferred in different parts of the country in response to land shortage through local institutional arrangements, rural land is the property of state for the last four decades and still so. The justifications provided by policy makers and state to keep rural land under public ownership is the assumption that rural land plays a social security role (that is, in terms of guaranteeing some form of livelihood through granting free access to a piece of land).

There are discursive arguments about the current policy and the constitution of Ethiopia. The argument is pacing political views and seeming propositions. Two of them are polarized and one 'muddle-through' propositions on land issues and livelihoods dynamism of rural people viz, the '*confinement*' (private ownership of land); '*paternalistic*' (state property) views/ propositions; and the '*associate ownership*' (mix of the two). The view may be practically naïve for the smallholders but worth discussing. While '*confinement*' is a proposition supported by international donor agencies, opposition parties and many intellectuals; the proponents of '*paternalistic*' are the government, the ruling party and some scholars.

### Confinement proposition

A typical argument that could characterize this claim, at a glance is echoed by Dessalegn Rahmato, who is not actually the proponent of the idea:

'The land system has discouraged peasant mobility and trapped the population in the rural areas. Improvements in livelihoods are impossible unless a considerable portion of this population is released from the land and moves out of the rural areas. The greater mobility of peasants out of agriculture will stimulate the greater mobility of land. Land will be able to move "freely" from those who cannot use it efficiently to those who can. The destination of a mobile peasantry will be the urban area' (Dessalegn, 1999:10).

The above proposition seems to imply that private ownership of land is a panacea for the interwoven agrarian maladies through promoting land transfer to more efficient farmers, encouraging peasantry mobility, increased land resource management, and improved rural livelihood. It is also widely suggested by the view that land is vanishing because as long as the tenure system continues to confer little or no security, farmers do not and will not care about the soil and productivity of their plots. The researcher questions this view that: (i) the

problem of rural poverty and rural livelihood deteriorations can not only be attributed to the problem of land tenure arrangement alone, but beyond though a good land policy is a priority to be settled; (ii) assuming farmers are abandoning farmland is very generalist and simplistic as farmers know the criticality of agricultural land. Thus, problem of tenure security is not basic argument as farmers still run short of other resources to invest on it.

In addition, secured and increased access to land and natural resources for the landless and 'land-poor' families is a key means of achieving livelihood goals. It also helps to broaden the economic opportunities available to them rather than automatic moving out of rural areas. Yet, the majority of poor people in developing countries still live in rural areas despite growing urbanisation and secured land. The argument here is, in Ethiopian context, improved access to land alone is not enough to improve rural livelihoods; it must be supported by adequate accompanying policies and related measures (access to credit and information, markets, agricultural technologies and extension, favourable economic environment).

### Paternalistic proposition

On the other hand, the government and the policy makers think differently and allege that 'if the current policy were changed in favour of private ownership, farmers are forced to resort to what is called distress sales and inundate the urban centres only to face the attendant social ills that are characteristic of such moves' (Solomon and Mansberger, 2003:4). To put it in the other way, the current policy is firmly devised because of the need to protect farmers from irreversible loss of their critical asset by the economically forceful capitalists. This is what can be called the '*paternalistic*' proposition.

Here, it can be argued that peasants are not as such delicate. They are rational in decision making on this key livelihood asset and many others in their lifetime. Moreover, it is possible to setup ownership right to farmers by putting in place laws and policies that prevent the imagined distress sale and inundation, and restrict the extent and scope of land marketing and its smooth operations like Japan (Ouchi, 1965), for example. As a result, this line of debate is also a simplistic and a mere generalist in the sense that: first, it missed respects for the farmers as empowered social force with the right and capacity to question their roles and services that is, the farmers are considered incapable to decide on their own resource but rather best governed by policy statements. Second, there was no attempts and willingness to create a room for farmers to give opinions on the matter so as to inculcate the public opinions in the policy formulation (<http://www.fssethiopia.org.et/onlinedebate>, 2010) for extended debates and opinions.

Being the foundation of second proposition notwithstanding, it is the ambiguity of the policies,

constitutional provision on land, and ideologies. Article 40 and sub-article 3 of the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, which is the base for the proposition state: *“The right to ownership of rural and urban land, as well as all natural resources, is exclusively vested in the state and in the people of Ethiopia. Land is common property of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale or other means of exchange”* (FDRE, 1995:98). Article 40 and sub-article 4 implicitly state the continuation of redistributions and reallocations of land as: *“Ethiopian peasants have right to obtain land without payment and the protection against eviction from their possession. The implementation of this provision shall be specified by law”* (FDRE, 1995:98).

Furthermore, FDRE (2001:11) document on Rural Development Policies, Strategies, and Instruments details the acquiring of land sufficient for peasants' livelihoods for free. Hence, any Ethiopian who wants to earn a living by farming has a right, which shall not be alienated, to obtain, without payment, the use of land, and the right of the government to redistribute land when the need arises. Nevertheless, the majority of young men and women farmers are either landless or simply relied upon a small plot of land on subsistence basis. Some are engaged in informal sharing and transfer through local institutional arrangements, others are acquired through formal and legal procedures and many others are landless.

Yeraswork (2000:286) stated that it is impractical simultaneously to uphold 'the right of every Ethiopian to provide agricultural land to those who want to engage in farm', and 'to respect the inviolability of existing holdings'. He further argued that these two cannot be synchronized for the simple reason that there are no reserve lands that can be recently distributed among land scarce farmers. As a result, the two rights are incompatible when per capita holding dwindles; population is increasing and non-agricultural sector of the economy is not expanding with the pace of absorbing the additional numbers. Given these situations, one may expect that the landless and land scarce farmers could claim their constitutional right to land. Hence, providing new farmers with land would necessarily imply the redistribution and reduction of existing holdings.

Summarily, the current constitution based argument resulted in sets of constraints than economic progresses. Crewett and Korf (2008:206) substantiated its negative effects as follows:

Broadly speaking, it is argued that state ownership of land yields negative effects on land productivity and therefore produces lower efficiency levels than would be achievable with the working of a private land market. In particular, those in favour of private property rights assert that state ownership provides barriers to full-scale efficiency, because of the following: it prevents the emergence of a dynamic

rural land market that allows entrepreneurial agents to access credit and land, it discourages farmers on marginal land to out-migrate and ties the farmer to inefficient uses of his land, which subsequently leads to fragmentation of plot size, overpopulation in the rural areas and resource degradation, and it perpetuates the legacies of the *derg* regime's redistribution programmes that are creating tenure insecurity and discouraging land owners from investing in sustainable resource use.

### **Associative ownership**

There is also a third proposition though not well developed in Ethiopian debate on land issues and peasants livelihoods (Dessalegn, 1999), that combines the above two and conceives 'associate ownership'. Though it may be sound and viable option, it is not as such brought into rural livelihoods and development forum to curb the agricultural land problems in the country. It upholds and recognizes local and informal land sharing and transfer. As far as it is operating at the gate of majority of peasants, it should not be denied. It has been also evolving from time to time.

This line of debate needs to be strengthened as land issue within a nation has diversity of implications in different contexts and purposes of the users. The pastoralist, agro-pastoralist, crop-based farmers, and/or small-scale and large commercial farmers demand a particular policy room to motivate agricultural land transfer, investment on agricultural growth and thereby rural transformation. These intermediate options (inheritance, sharecropping, land registration, consolidation of fragmented plots and validation of an informal rental market that is already operating covertly) have the potential for positive synergies between livelihood 'protection' and 'promotion' for small farmers (Devereux and Guenther, 2009:17).

Back to the two extremes, they are irreconcilable as far as the Ethiopian land policy is indoctrinated in the country's constitution and becomes a political gadget rather than economic resource. Therefore, one can conclude that both extremes pretend to answer the question how to promote a dynamic rural economy and improve rural livelihoods on the uniform assumption that local and informal land acquisition and transfer institutions have no role to maintain and resolve the problem of land scare and landless farmers. Rather, both attached to the notion of formal institutional arrangement that agricultural land is either kept under state or sold like any other means of production. Nonetheless, peasants' livelihood dynamism is not as simple as this rather becoming a challenge to sustainable rural development. It bears a complicated scenario if it is undermined and/or completely ignored informal institutions. In view of this, a reconciling proposition is the selective context-based

reconsideration of policy, associative ownership, to build up on the best local experiences and flexible macro policy for agrarian transformations. At micro level, it is also imperative to accord that heterogeneity in livelihood strategies and uneven asset endowments among households can create heterogeneous livelihood paths (Tschakert et al., 2006:807). Hence it is better to utilize appropriate and suitable institutional arrangements. Indeed, only the better-endowed households that have managed to diversify into more lucrative farming and non-farming activities and have access to critical livelihood assets are likely to survive in the rural area without looking for land transfer and sharing from their families. In this regard, this research comes up with empirical evidence to challenge the first two propositions and support an associative ownership as institutional arrangement to acquire agricultural land through identifying and analysing both formal and informal institutions as well as assessing the outcome of these institutions on the peasants' livelihoods.

## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Land is the fundamental basis of the livelihoods of the farming population. Agricultural land (also agricultural area) denotes the land suitable for agricultural production, both crops and livestock. It is one of the main resources of food, income, and simply everything for the people engaged in agriculture. An old Japanese saying goes, "a farmer without land is like a man without a soul" (Dessalegn, 1999). That means the state has no right to land and thus it unanimously belongs to the users. Agricultural land is scarce when it is economically limited in size for accomplishing the needs of the holder and supports his/her livelihood. However, it is not the size of land that matters but the farmers' decisions to adopt new technology, select enterprise and other socio-economic characteristics (Piya et al., 2012), such as social bonds and relationships called social capital.

Social capital refers to social resources which farmers use to support each other in seeking survival during shortage of agricultural resources, mainly land sharing and transfer. This comes from formal and informal institutions (inheritance, land certification, contracting and sharecropping), district and local level organizations. The participation in informal and formal groups (member of Iqub, Edir, Jigii and Saving and Credit Organizations), social relations, networks and connections, reciprocity and interchanges facilitate cooperation, reduce costs of transactions, enhance natural resource management, and provide the base to create security networks between those less privileged.

Institutions are rules that limit and permit free interaction of people thereby exerting pressure on the freedom of individuals and societies for the safety of all. It implies that institutions are both constraints and opportunities for actions, for institutions are systems of

collective rules and practices that enable individuals to work together for a common purpose. North (1990) explained that institutions are "rules-of-the-game" and they are also organizations that play the games.

Nonetheless, the term institution has never been easy to be defined in terms of 'rule-of-the-game'. In the context of this paper, institutions are conceptualized as both formal and informal practices, arrangements or mechanisms that enable sharing and transfer of agricultural land for land scarce and landless farmers.

Formal institutions are mechanisms and/or arrangement of land acquisition through distribution or redistribution by different level of state authority. It is regulated by district and local administrations. It also includes formal contractual agreement of land market and sharecropping. Informal institutions of land sharing and transfer include inheritance, donation from family, informal rent-out/lease to other farmers, sharecropping without formal agreement. It is a consent by the two parties in exchange and transaction without the intervention of district or local administrations.

The paper adopted Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) to underpin the institution of land acquisition among the agricultural land scarce farmers. It also captures the roles these institutions play in land sharing and transferring. The reason is that there is a radical junction between the convectional institution analysis and SLA. While the conventional one views a linear, research → policy → practice model; SLA could be triangular type where all components inform each other (Solesbury, 2003; Chambers and Conway, 1992). It also shifted the development philosophy from traditional —resource-focused development to vulnerability analysis.

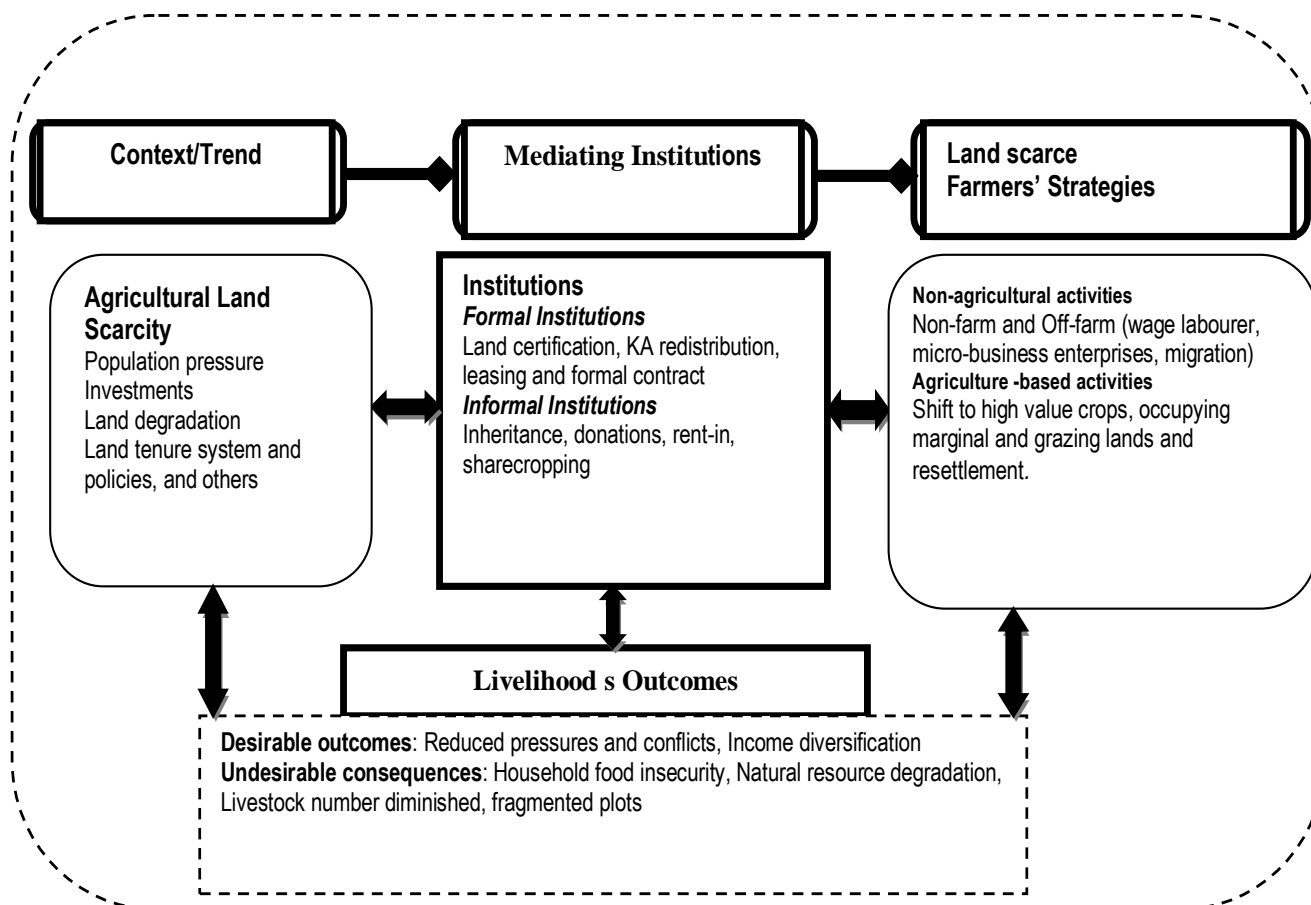
The framework, therefore, highlighted four interacting elements: contexts; mediating processes and institutions; strategies of the land scarce farmers; and the outcomes of the institutions (Scoones, 1998). It attempts to address these concepts *vis-a-vis* the role of different land sharing institutions. The interaction is shown in Figure 1.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed qualitative and quantitative research methods combined in a creative and logical manner so as to fully capture pertinent information to attain the research objective. The study was designed as a case study. The data for this study were gathered from two agro-ecologically distinct rural communities and gender disaggregated household heads in the Tole District to understand the institutions of land sharing and acquisition. The field study combined Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Household Surveys. While semi-structured checklists were designed to manage the FGDs and KIIs, structured and semi-structured interview schedule was developed to undertake the household survey.

### Site selection and sampling procedures

The study involved a multistage sampling, that is, a combination of purposive, stratified, and simple random sampling procedures to



**Figure 1.** A framework to examine institutions of agricultural land acquisition and transfer. Adapted from Degefa (2008); Scoones (2009; 1998); DFID (2000); Ellis (2000).

select the study area and household sample. First, the district was purposefully selected. Then, based on agro-ecology, the district was divided into two. These are midland and highland agro-ecologies (AEZs). Accordingly, from each agro-ecology, one top most populous *Kebele* -lowest administrative unit in Ethiopia (the smallest land-active labor force ratio), was sampled. Consequently, *Kursit Areda Leqa* (KAL) *Kebele* was selected purposefully from midland while *Malima Tume Chirfa* (MTC) was sampled to represent the highland AEZ. The two *Kebeles* are further stratified into two as female-headed-households (FHHs), and male-headed-households (MHHs) to obtain gender disaggregated data. Finally, simple random sampling technique, using a lottery method, was used to select 100 households from the two *Kebeles* for the individual interview.

#### Data analysis

In order to analyze and present the data, a combination of qualitative and quantitative method was used. Statistical techniques such as cross tabulations, averages, standard deviations, and chi-square test were used for quantitative data analysis. Qualitative information was organized and constructed coherently and analyzed. Narrations were also used for qualitative data analysis. The results of the key findings were displayed in the form of percentages and tables.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Basic characteristics of the household heads

The respondents' ages are categorized based on the reference year when the last land redistribution was carried out in the area, which goes back to 1977. Accordingly, the age of the respondents are categorized into four. The first group is 19 to 33 years old which comprises 58% of the household surveyed. The second category aged between 34 to 48 years, which constitutes 34% of the total respondents. The third (49 to 63 years) and the fourth (above 64) age categories are only 6.7% and 1.2% of the total respondents, respectively. These vividly depict that majority of farmers who face problem of agricultural land are the younger group. This group did not acquire land through the radical land reform of formal early land distribution of the 1977. Moreover, to get a clear picture of gender inequality, a gender disaggregated data about 30% of the respondents were Female Headed Households (FHHs).

In this study, two agro-ecologically distinct communities

were studied for the sake of comparison. Accordingly, 60% of the respondents are from Midland and the rest 40% are from Highland agro-ecological Zone. Majority of the land scarce farmers, 60% of Female Headed Households (FHHs) and 74.25% of Men Headed Household (MHHs) have lived in the area for more than 25 years. None of the MHH was planning to leave the area in contrast to 6.25% of FHH who will leave the area after a while to seek for more remunerative urban jobs. Likewise, 43.75% of FHHs were not happy and do not prefer to live in their current villages because they are too poor to earn their living sufficiently from the current livelihood activities compared to MHHs. Despite the serious shortage of farmland, the figure was fairly low (4%) for the MHHs. The justification behind this figure was that they prefer the climate, the strong ties of local institutions like Iddir, sharing among relatives, respects for their place of birth, and other amenities.

As a result, they preferred to live in their village relying on informal institutional arrangements to get farmland and earn a living. This was also the very reason why they rejected the government's offering of the resettlement program to other zones of the region where land is relatively abundant. Statistical test was also employed whether the period of residence in the village has an association with landholding size. Accordingly, the longer the period of residence, the larger could be the landholding size of the respondents. This either may be due to the tendency of the longer residents to acquire land through different means that is, formally through the 1977 land distribution or informally inheriting or obtaining through different arrangements. In addition, the different ethnic groups are inter-marrying and living in harmony. They are also almost sharing the same culture, social, and economic resources and services.

### **The trend and context agricultural land sharing and transfer**

Historically, both in the imperial and socialist regimes, female farmers were very unlikely to access and control land and land resources. They were often denied their right in their communities and the law did not guarantee equal right over land and land resources. They could not inherit farmland from their family as men did. The FHHs' Focused Group Discussants desolately put that they were either divorced or widowed. When they divorced, they were denied access to share their property including land in most cases. Some FGDs participants reported that they were often intimidated by their former husbands not to go to court for legal process. Widowed women were usually expelled from their late husbands' locality as they were considered outsiders. The close relative of the husband inherits the land and the women either go back to their parents or flee to urban centers. However, the situation is immensely improved now and they have almost equal rights that are guaranteed by the FDRE law and the protection by their society- local institutions. The

FGDs probed both FHHs and MHHs interviewees who stated that presently women have better right than before over land and other properties due to the growing awareness, despite much dissatisfaction.

The youths are the other category experiencing the predicament of land scarcity. It is the worst of all problems for the rural youth farmers. They are either not born or not eligible to get land during the 1977 land redistribution. Of course, there was no land redistribution after the 1977. Key informant interviews with elders depicted that the size of agricultural land, including settlements and grazing lands, provided for a couple was around 2.67 hectares and nearly a hectare for a single farmer or dependent farm family during the redistribution and now it is dwindled to under a hectare as it was shared and transferred to their children.

Statistical data (CSA 2007, 1994, 1984) depicted that the farming populations are increasing, new farming members are born and indeed, land could not be expanded. As a result, the same land has to be redistributed among family members now and then. In other words, it was fragmented from year to year, as young farmers have to share agricultural land from their family. It was also found that none of the respondents in the survey practice fallowing, the customs that traditional land fertility restoration farming system depends on. The agricultural land has to be used intensively without fallowing and applying insufficient fertilizer (Samuel, 2006). In turn, productivity of land is immensely declining.

In order to define what could be the minimum landholding to survive in the village, relevant information was collected using varieties of instruments and sources. The instruments include: interviews with key peasant informants and with about half a dozen of local public officials, and FGDs among a number of FHHs and MHHs. Consistently, it was suggested that the potential productivity of land in the highland and midland is not the same. According to the District Land Administration and Environmental Protection Office's land fertility classification, while the highland area is poor due to severe soil erosion and the type of soil, the midland is relatively better-off. Thus, the minimum hurdle at the current level of technologies also varies with a particular AEZ. The threshold is below a hectare in the midland and less than two hectare for the highland counterpart.

In both cases, the largest proportion of their holdings was allocated to cultivation of different crops. In the highland areas, the sampled land scarce farmers are holding a hectare with a maximum of two hectares and minimum of 0.16; whereas in the midland, the average is 0.62 and maximum and minimum holdings are 1.0 and 0.16 hectares, respectively. When the cultivated and grazing lands are taken into consideration, it gives a different scene. The average grazing land in the highland (0.36 ha) was double of the midland (0.18 ha). It is not surprising that the cultivated land (0.64 ha) was greater than total holding (0.62 ha) in the midland. This was

**Table 1.** Landholding size (in ha.) and use patterns in 2009/2010.

Agro-ecological zone (n=100)			Landholding	Cultivated Land	Grazing Land	
Highland- Malima Tume Chirfa (MTC)			Mean	1.0826	0.9020	0.3620
			Std. Deviation	0.58285	0.43229	0.23136
			Minimum	0.16	0.16	0.17
			Maximum	2.00	1.50	0.43
Midland- Leqa (KAL)	Kursit Areda		Mean	0.6186	0.6414	0.1825
			Std. Deviation	0.23716	0.31527	0.08706
			Minimum	0.16	0.16	0.08
			Maximum	1.00	2.00	0.30
Total			Mean	0.8104	0.7470	0.2726
			Std. Deviation	0.47255	0.38651	0.19786
			Minimum	0.16	0.16	0.08
			Maximum	2.00	2.00	0.30

Source: Own Survey, 2010.

mainly due to renting-in and engagements in sharecropping along with their actual holdings. In sum, while both the size and the per capita grazing land was dwindling, the cultivated land was increasing at the expense of grazing land but per capita holding was diminishing. This trade-off put land scarce farmers in vicious cycle of poverty and vulnerability to agricultural land dearth. Table 1 illustrates the landholding size of the sampled peasants in the study area.

### **System of land acquisition**

Table 1 depicts that the average landholding size in the highland Agro-ecological Zone (AEZ) is 1.08 hectare and 0.62 hectare in the midland. The FHHs and MHHs are tilling 0.76 and 0.82 hectares, respectively. The majority of the land scarce farmers acquire agricultural land through inheritance and donation from their family. They are negotiating their family to get a slice of land to engage in agricultural activities. It is simply sharing among the family members, which is not legal but it is the local institutional arrangement for the extended family to overcome the dearth of the resource. This became a prominent system of land transfer.

The current holdings of the land scarce farmer also tell of the same scenarios. There are several mechanisms that the land scarce and landless farmers use to obtain agricultural land. These take the forms of gift, inheritance, and acquisition through Kebele Administration and the combination of them. Some of the acquisitions are on permanent basis while others are for given periods of time that do not exceed three years (Table 1).

Quite more than half of the respondents (52%) obtained the current holding through inheritance from

their parents, which also significantly vary in AEZs, that is, 45% in the highland and 56.67% in the midland. This was followed by acquisition through donation from late parents and other close relatives (14%) who make up 20% of highland and only 10% in the midland. There were informal sharecropping arrangements in the village or outside the village in both AEZs that comprise 12% of the respondents.

Farmers in both AEZs were also obtaining farmland through lease/renting-in (9%) for a cropping season. Only a few farmers (7%) acquired farmland through formal arrangement - the 1977 land redistribution. The combination of inheritance, sharecropped, and rented-in the mechanisms also shares 2% of land acquisitions. Thus, informal sharing and transfer of agricultural land were more dominant than the formal government institution's redistribution in the study area. Table 2 portrays the mechanisms of land acquisition among the land scarce farmers in the area.

This finding seems consistent with Dercon et al. (2005), who found similar result that supports the importance of local institutional arrangements. According to their study, despite all land is state-owned, on average 73% of the cultivated land is inherited, meaning that it was acquired from their fathers. About 9% was purchased, mainly before 1977. About 11% of the land was directly allocated by the local administration to the household, as part of the land reform in 1977, or subsequent reallocations in the village. About 7% of land was sharecropped or rented. Inherited land relative to allocated or sharecropped land may appear surprisingly high in the overall context of Ethiopia.

Gender based disaggregated data disclosed that while 33(33%), 13(13%), 12(12%), 9(9%), and 5(5%) of the MHHs acquired agricultural land through inheritance,



**Table 2.** The mechanisms that the current respondents' landholdings are obtained.

Land acquisition mechanisms	Sampled Kebele (n=100)		Total
	MTC (n=40)	KAL (n=60)	
Inheritance	18 (45%)	34 (56.67%)	52 (52%)
From Kebele administration (KA)	4 (10%)	3 (5%)	7(7%)
Donation from relative	8 (20%)	6 (10%)	14 (14.0%)
Donation and KA	0 (0.0%)	3 (5%)	3 (3.0%)
Sharecropping	5 (12.5%)	7 (11.67%)	12 (12%)
Renting-in	3 (7.5%)	6 (10%)	9 (9%)
Inheritance, sharecropping, and rented-in	2 (5%)	0 (.0%)	2 (2 %)
Donation and partially clearing forest	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.66%)	1 (1%)

Note. The numbers outside the parenthesis are representing the count. Source: Own Survey, 2010.

donation from relatives, sharecropping, and renting-in, respectively; the FHHs counterpart acquired agricultural land through inheritance 19(19%), Kebele administration 2(2%), donation from relatives 1(1%) and 6(6%) combination of these. It is worth to note that majority of the inheritances of farmland among the respondents were not smooth. It was through court decisions that the claims are often settled unlike the transfers/donations, which are positive sentiments of the giver. To cite an example, about 79% of the court cases in the study district were directly and indirectly related to land acquisition, farmland border disputes, and inheritance issues.

Female-headed households were in the worst position and discriminated both by formal and informal institutions of agricultural land acquisition. As shown above, except inheritance all arrangements discriminate women. Field evidence also showed that most farmers who rented-out or gave sharecropping were not willing to share or transfer their land to women for the very reason that they doubted the performances of female farmers in agricultural production and paying back in cash or in kind as per their agreement. However, most farmers prefer to rent-in and take sharecropping from FHHs as they are not stringent on land management and do not discard agreements in short-term with changing condition.

This survey also attempted to capture whether or not agricultural land could be obtained in selected Kebeles if one wants to engage in farming. The result depicted that the majority (85%) of the respondents could obtain agricultural land mainly through informal institutional arrangements while 15% stated that there are possibilities but they could not access due to high price of land rent-in, requirements of draught power and labor to engage in sharecropping through formal arrangements.

Whatever the case may be, without these informal sharing and transferring mechanisms, the life of land scarce and young farmers might be at stack and show the 'associative ownership' of land acquisition was already operating covertly to cope with land scarcity. In other words, whatever the regional or the federal land

policies and administrations dictate, local specific informal institutional arrangements are the widely practiced. It took a well-grounded acquisition of agricultural land than the widely assumed formal institutional devices of government authorities. This also shows the confrontation that widely preached private ownership proposition is misleading without considering informal institutional arrangements.

### ***The local institutions and social networks***

In this subsection, the presence and role of local institutions and social networks are discussed with special emphasis on agricultural land sharing and transferring. The webs of these institutions are often based on neighborhood, marriage and kinship/sibling, religious groups, labor sharing groups, and sharecropping. Other types of linkage are provided through membership of various committees and associations. These key types of local institutions and social networks in the society encompass the agricultural land, seeds, draught power and food sharing mechanisms that are the exciting features of the society in this study.

The FGDs with both FHHs and MHHs revealed that such customary exchange remain an essential feature of social relocations in both the highland and midland agro-ecologies. The exchange occurs between kin living nearby and many continue to participate in exchange with relatives in their home villages either through hosting short-term visitors or by making cash contributions or relief during emergencies. Moreover, there was contribution of food and drink in addition to cash for bigger events such as marriage and death. Apart from kinship relationships, non-kin exchanges were paramount popular to create sense of belongingness to the community and strengthening of the social capital, which showed a social and economic linkage among the land scarce farmers and the rest of the community members. In such a way, the customary exchange was persistently

carried out between and within lineages and neighbors of the farmers, which tied people into webs of social and economic obligations. Despite such interwoven social networks and 'customary exchanges', land sharing and transfer was only limited to blood and marriage ties as well as within a given vicinities.

Specifically, some of the most important local social institutions in relation to land scarce farmers include memberships of Kebele administration, Iddir, Iqub, Jigge/Dabo, Religious Association, Cooperatives, Kebele Administration Council, District Council, and School Committee. Although substantial land scarce farmers are members of Kebele administration (97%), only two of other institutions' members showed significant levels of membership. That is, 87% for Iddir and 84% whose aged over 20, were members of burial societies. The other most popular body was the Dabo/Jige (63%) - a group labor sharing party during the peak season and in case of emergency, and followed by the group recycling contribution, Iqub (43%). About a third of the respondents were also a member of cooperatives and more than a fifth took part in the *Kebele* Council - the grassroots level of formal government institution. Only 7% and 1% of them said that they were member of District Council and School Committee, respectively; the former is the highest level of institution in the district. Moreover, the analysis of institutional landscape of the land scarce farmers showed that the *Iddir* and Religious Associations for burial reason were stronger community-based institutions and very popular.

It was also clear from the results of KIIs and FGDs that coffee making 'clubs' play a more important role in creating social liaison among the neighborhoods. They shared farm resources, information, borrowed money, ate and drank together. Presumably, through the coffee clubs successful *Iqub* and *Dabo/Jige* were often established in the local settings. The club has grown up to an institution that accumulates capital and has made a small number of loans to households for various purposes. This reciprocal relationship was not a new feature of the institutional scene in the study area. Nevertheless, during this study, such institutions have a lacuna in addressing the natural capital depletion aroused from cultivation of forestlands, riversides, and sloppy plots. It attempted to design any strategy that enhances transition to alternative livelihoods activities. Only, to some extent, the institutions have discouraged the inappropriate utilization of local forest areas but some individuals are widely operating covertly.

Thus, as Koczberski et al. (2001) put it and the field evidence confirmed, the 'indigenous economy' constitutes the exchange of goods, services, labor, and cash between kin and acquaintances. It may be by design or default; the ultimate effects of exchange have banded individuals and groups into networks of social relationships and obligations. The 'customary exchanges' in the study area have taken the form of daily gifts

materially in kind, various services and cash contributions to major events to mark initiations, marriage, birth, death, adoption, dispute settlements, risk of loss of property, and land transfer systems. The institution of exchange was found to be extremely important to maintain a society in general and enabled the land scarce farmers to acquire farmland in particular.

### ***Outcome of the institutions***

For the sake of this research and based on conceptual framework adopted for this work, institutional arrangements were categorized into informal and formal mechanism of land acquisition and transfer. The informal includes land inheritance, donation from relatives, informal renting-in and sharecropping. There were categorized under informal institutional arrangement as there was no formal lease or contractual agreement so far entered during land acquisition and transfer in the community. The government reallocation or redistribution through District/Kebele administration was referred to as formal institutional arrangement because all acquisition and transfer was formal and recognized by local or district government.

### ***Formal Institutions***

The formal institutional arrangement for acquisition of agricultural land is under state control; redistribution and reallocation at district and/or Kebele level. In the study area, formal land reallocation in 1977 has had tremendous and radical land tenure status quo and agrarian structure change. After this, there was no redistribution of land for new farmers and the voice of landless and land scarce rural dwellers are still becoming louder than ever. Therefore, land as a government property and more specifically the only way of sharing and transfer through formal institutional mechanism suffered many deficiencies. First, the government policy on the land and land resource was too rigid to operate according to different societal contexts and failed to recognize informal institutions.

Second, the condition of landless and land scarce farmers in the rural area was not taken into consideration but sole relegation of alternative policy statements. The redistribution of land through government authority seemed improbable without disappointing and/or dislocating other farmers. This may have severe social and political costs.

Third, land certification is an attempt to demolish the local informal land acquiring institutions and the new formal institutional arrangement of land rental is expensive and has high transaction costs.

Unlike informal land renting, the price of renting-in/leasing land is expensive and one cannot rent-in or

contract land for more than three years. This further creates artificial scarcity. As Ushakov (2011) noted that domestic economic systems investment attractiveness and innovative level are closely interrelated in the case of capital. Likewise, agricultural land is becoming a source of attractiveness for international capital inflow in Ethiopia and widely setting frustration that the practice could demolish the traditional transfer systems and overwhelmingly increase the land scarcity and landlessness.

Fourth, there were no such comprehensive alternative programs to satisfy the huge demands for agricultural land and reduce the heavy burden on the agricultural land. There was no land saving and productivity augmenting technologies or options that could expand opportunities of non-farming and off-farming activities for the growing rural population.

Finally, despite the fact that fertilizer accessibility is heavily dependent on cash and credit arrangement essential for small scale agriculture (Damisa et al., 2008), government ceased credit services and launched centralized agricultural input supplies, which affected farmers' productivity from the existing small plots and further complicated the life of landless and land scarce poor peasants. Thus, in addition to high population growth, soil degradation, and unfavorable land tenure system, the absence of smallholder focused agricultural and rural development policies, which failed to create rural businesses and other jobs trapped young farmers into vicious cycle of poverty and hunger.

### ***The informal institutions***

Field evidence showed that about 58% of the respondents were not born and 34% of them were not eligible for the 1977 land redistribution. This redistribution was also implicitly marginalized FHHs from access to land and land resources. Even though the situation is immensely improved now and they have equal rights that are guaranteed by the current law and the society, they were denied access to share their property including land in most cases through formal institutional arrangements. As a result, the best mechanism, they approach such cases are through local or clan elders to acquire land.

From the lens of SLA, while the existence and role of informal local institutions were acknowledged as a social capital that enhances the livelihood of land scarce farmers, a handful of the key informants and focused group participants presumably reflected the notion that these institutions are predicament to diversify livelihood strategies to more modern sectors. The practices and norms confined the people to stay at home village and forfeited to open up opportunities available to them. This norm created dependency syndrome on their parents and local societies and economic reliance on meager local resources. To cite an example, the land scarce farmers

rejected the government resettlement program to the more abundant farmland areas outside their administrative zone mainly due to the societal ties they established at home communities.

However, some land scarce farmers opposed the above view. First, whatever informal institutions existed and retained in the community, they were not threats but opportunities for diversification of livelihood strategies and served towards the end of the social security and wealth redistribution. Second, it is improbable to assume that the land scarce farmers are still solely undertaking cultural/customary practices. The field evidence further disclosed that they were not away from a piece-meal of modern agricultural practices such as commercial fertilizers, High Yield Varieties (HYVs), and better farm tools. Thus, it is plausible to say that informal institutional arrangement is more dominant, facilitate agricultural land sharing and transfer; its positive outcomes outweigh its pitfalls, and widely accepted and accessed in the face of local community than the formal institution which is already obsolete to enhance land acquisition and transfer for the smallholder, land scarce and landless farmers (Table 3 shows comparison of formal and informal institutions).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This paper strives to indicate some of the key institutions that facilitate agricultural land acquisition and transfer among the land scarce and landless segment of farmers. Despite an enormous emphases of scholars, policy makers, donor agencies and political parties on the contribution and arrangement of formal institutions and policies, a close look at and the analysis of agrarian social relations, institutions, and livelihoods revealed that the role of informal institutions are tremendous in mitigating social unrest that could be arisen from severe agricultural shortage.

The majority of the highland and midland agricultural land scarce households are predominantly acquiring agricultural land through inheritances from their parents followed by donations from relatives, sharecropping, renting-in, Kebele administrations, and acquisition from the combination of these mechanisms. It was also found that the land scarce and landless peasants engaged in land renting-in within and outside their village. Social capital was found to be strong to share and access land. Thus, the reality on ground is that the farmers perceived that land belongs to them, not anyone else. It can be transferred to other holders based on their consent. In this regard, policy polarities are a mere gadget for political benefit than economic importance.

The other key contention in this paper is that within a given community, there are tradeoffs between the formal and informal institutions as one is against the other rather than augmenting each other. The land certification, for

**Table 3.** Comparison of formal and informal institutions of land acquisition and transfer.

<b>Formal Institutions</b>	<b>Informal institutions</b>
(i) State control, redistribution and reallocation at District and/or Kebele level	(i) Community control, redistribution and reallocation at community/ household level
(ii) Not responsive to new farmers, landless and land scarce rural dwellers	(ii) Responsive to the new farmers , landless and land scarce
(iii) Land as a government property is too rigid in terms of sharing and transfer and suffers many deficiencies.	(iii) In such acquisitions and transfers are easy and flexible.
(iv) Fail to recognize overwhelmingly used informal institutional arrangements	(iv) Operate according to different societal contexts
(v) Because of severe social and political costs, redistribution through government authority seems improbable without disappointing and/or dislocating other farmers.	(v) Such sharing and transfer is mostly based on consent and less likely to disappoint and/or dislocate other farmers.
(vi) Formal institutional arrangement of land rental is expensive and has high transaction costs.	(vi) Informal institutional arrangement of land acquisition is less expensive and has low transaction costs
(vii) One cannot rent-in or contract land for more than three years. This further created artificial scarcity	(vii) No limit as far as the two parts in rent-in or contract agree, that is, may be permanent or temporary.
(viii) No as such comprehensive alternative programs to satisfy the huge demands for agricultural land.	(viii) It is an alternative social set up and reduces the huge demands for land.
(ix) No options that can expand opportunities of non-farm and off-farm activities for the growing rural population.	(ix) Created dependency syndrome on their parents and local societies and economic reliance on meagre local resources

instance, has enriched the formal institutions on one hand and slimed the life and opportunity of new entrants through abandoning the informal institutional set up on the other hand.

It is also plausible to conclude that agrarian population is increasing without hand in hand expansion of urbanization and/or generation of non-agricultural sources of livelihood. As far as it is impossible to expand agricultural land and no limit for dramatic increase of farming population, land acquisition mechanisms through sharing and transfer are not a panacea to uplift land scarce peasants from poverty trap.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The informal institutions are already operating broadly at societal level and immensely curbing a problem of land shortage and thus they must be recognized and inculcated to formal institutional arrangements. Even though the institutions of land acquisition and transfer were immensely important to resolve the current social ills-like land shortage, they were not sustainable remedy to transform agrarian economy and society. Therefore, scouting alternative livelihood mechanisms are not an option but an imperative. Some of the avenues possibly suggested are creating adequate non-agricultural employment, access to sufficient credit, improved farm technologies, market and communication infrastructures to increase productivity from the existing plot along with management and conservation of natural resources. Specifically, land saving agricultural activities such as

livestock fattening, chicken raising, beekeeping and diversification of with high-value and vegetable production are essential to diversify livelihood and exploit the niche opportunities. The best approach to overcome land shortage is to promote a package of integrated agricultural and non-agricultural livelihood strategies. Finally, based on the theoretical and review of related literatures and the outcomes of the research findings and gaps, the following thematic areas are suggested for further research. These are the role of village wage employments in reducing the pressure on agricultural land and thereby the rural households'livelihood, and the effects of social and marketing infrastructures and the role of micro-finance and credit provision on the livelihood diversifications of agricultural land scarce and landless farmers.

## Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

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