

## Power Structures, Agency and Community Dynamics in Rural Ethiopia

### *A Research-based Policy Brief: September 2007*

#### Key Policy Messages

##### Livelihoods

Landlessness and inequality is leading to class formation involving sharecropping, daily labour, household servants and labourers.

##### Reproduction

Risks for mothers in pregnancy and giving birth, nutrition of babies and children, child work and gender-age hierarchies seriously affect life chances.

##### Governance

Community and government governance structures have different logics and priorities that may work independently, in collaboration or confrontation.

##### Ideologies

Local traditional, modern, religious, government, and donor/NGO ideologies compete for people's allegiances, and contradictions may heighten intolerance and affect development.

##### Empowerment

The powerless are diverse though frequently poor; empowerment of children, young, landless, women and elderly requires culturally sensitive and participatory support from government, donor and NGOs.

#### Background

In 2002 the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) financed a 5-year multi-country and multi-method programme of academic research into well-being in developing countries based at the University of Bath. Some of the data were used in a paper on power structures, agency and dynamics written for the World Bank Empowerment Team. This policy brief distils the lessons.

#### Methodology

Data were made in four rural communities selected as *exemplars* to allow comparison of Amhara/Oromia sites, ethnically and religiously heterogeneous and homogenous sites, cash-crop surplus-producing and drought-prone food-deficit sites, and peri-urban and more remote sites. Common survey, protocol and psychological instruments generated data which have been interpreted and analysed qualitatively and quantitatively at community, household and individual levels using a nested case-based approach.

#### WHY power matters

In such rural communities power structures and unequal personal agency are important for development policy and practice for four reasons:

- 1) They act as 'filters' to all community interventions. People with strong personal agency occupying powerful roles are able to make decisions and take actions which divert resources mobilised during the intervention. People with weak personal agency and low social status may not be able to take advantage of opportunities created by interventions.
- 2) Power structures or personal agency may be targets of 'empowerment' interventions. These may be designed to change formal rules, to introduce new ideas, or to strengthen the personal or collective agency of particular types of disempowered people.
- 3) Development interventions with goals unrelated to empowerment may have the unintended consequence of over-empowering or

disempowering particular people or groups, requiring compensatory strategies.

4) Development depends on changes in institutions, relationships, agency, preferences and practices but local power structures are highly resilient, partly because they have evolved to ensure community survival in the face of long-term environmental challenges.

## HOW power matters

The extent to which people exercise personal power in any situation depends on an interaction between **personal agency** and **structures of opportunity and constraint**. These power structures present different opportunities and constraints to different kinds of people. They are constituted by:

- (1) **social relationships** among social actors in **material contexts**;
- (2) the **institutions** or roles, rules and norms associated with these relationships; and
- (3) the **ideas** or values, beliefs, knowledge and information justifying these relationships.



Five types of power involving **relationships** are important for agency and other life quality outcomes, each with individual and collective aspects: **power to, power with, power over, power on behalf of and power against**. **Symbolic power** is implicit in the **institutions** which prescribe different kinds of behaviour

for people of different social statuses, and dominant **ideas** about what differences matter and why.

Local power structures exist in four **domains of power** or **fields of action**: 1) livelihoods, 2) human production and reproduction, 3) community management, and 4) the re/production and dissemination of ideas. 'Households' and kin networks form the core of the livelihood, human re/production and local social protection fields.

Current **personal agency profiles** are the historical outcomes of past interactions between agency and structures. People of different genders/ ages/ wealths / social origins face different opportunities and constraints in each of the fields, bringing to them different embodied personal agency profiles developed through their life experiences thus far. Personal

agency profiles are a mix of internalised values, norms and goals, embodied in/competences related to health and skills, and psychological resources/liabilities such as confidence or lack of autonomy.

## Research questions

**1. In these communities how do local power structures affect the personal and collective power of rural people of different genders, ages, household wealth, ethnicity, and religion?**

What are the opportunities and constraints in the different fields for women, gendered children, and gendered old people? How do differences in wealth, ethnicity and religion affect opportunities, constraints and personal agency?

**2. How does the functioning of, and interactions among, the four fields of action contribute to the collective achievements and failures of the community system?**

What collective facilitative power and liabilities are associated with the operation of the fields? What are the collective and individual consequences of the ways in which material and human resources are mobilised? How efficacious are governance structures? What roles do cultural ideas play?

**3. What have been the trajectories of the community systems in the longer run?**

To what extent have processes within the fields of action promoted reproduction or change in the community systems? Are the communities trapped in 'low-level' equilibria? Are there internal or external 'drivers of change' leading to changes of direction in the future? Are there different answers for different types of community?

## Community reproduction and drivers of change

There are a number of continuities in the stories of these communities, chief of which is that, since their reconstruction after the fall of the Derg in 1991, there have not been any structural changes which look likely to set them off on new trajectories. In much of rural Ethiopia the operations and configuration of the four community fields are geared to reproduce communities with low levels of facilitative power and poor life quality outcomes. Community systems seem trapped in low-level equilibria.

However, a number of 'drivers of change' pose potential threats to the stability of local structures, including:

- Existing land shortages combined with the large youth population will push many young people off the land.
- An increasingly educated population with access to global cultures might not respond well to overly-authoritarian governance structures and actions.

- If homegrown organisations such as *iddir* (funeral associations) are allowed to develop and mobilise a locally-rooted civil society will emerge.
- Government activities supported by donors are promoting human development and providing social protection in the drought-prone sites; the longer-term consequences of these activities are unclear
- There are great dangers in the current politicisation of ethnicity (see Somalia) and religion (see the Sudan) which cannot be ignored by external development actors.

It is not easy to predict how local agents and structures will respond to these environmental and emergent challenges, what initiatives government will take, or what the local consequences of such initiatives will be as the processes play out. In relation to development initiatives our study revealed issues in each of the fields of action where interventions could make a difference.

## KEY POLICY MESSAGES:

### 1) Livelihoods

There are marked inequalities in access to **productive resources**. Across the communities between 15-20% of households are rich in local productive assets while 33-40% are poor, very poor or destitute. Increasing landlessness and wealth inequality is associated with **class formation** involving share-cropping and the employment of daily labourers and longer-term servants for agricultural work and herding. In some contexts these are temporary in-migrants.

Farming is the key activity in all sites and there are no local signs of the 'industrialisation' which the agricultural-development strategy was designed to underpin. No employment opportunities have been provided through inward investment. Dominant local habituses in which farming is the only desirable and respectable occupation apart from government employment mean that those with the entrepreneurial 'animal spirits' that exist everywhere have neither the inclination nor the competence to invest in small-enterprise production.

### 2) Producing people

Many of the institutions and practices surrounding pregnancy, birth and the post-partum period produce risks for both mother and baby with consequences for the personal agency profiles of both, if they survive.

Personal agency profiles are laid down in childhood; as babies grow towards adulthood they develop physically and mentally and learn locally appropriate skills more or less well, incorporate family values, norms, beliefs,

and 'ways of doing things', and develop psychological resources and liabilities.

Few children get nutritionally-balanced diets, while those in drought situations and in poor households often starve for shorter or longer periods. Most start



farm or domestic work at around the age of six, as they are taught the skills important for farming and

domesticity while making increasingly important contributions to the household economy. Children from poor families may be hired out as servants from very young ages. An increasing proportion of children go to school with most mixing work and schooling.

Children grow up in households organised on the basis of gendered hierarchies in which domination and violence by 'superiors' in relation to 'inferiors' is common, although less severe than in the past. Boys are encouraged to be aggressive, which is linked with the idea of family protection, while girls are taught to be quiet and submissive, linked with the idea of them becoming homemakers. During education children learn new ways of thinking, although gendered hierarchies and violence are also found in schools.

### 3) Community governance

This field of action contains *two interactive governance structures*, one with its roots in the community and the other brought into the community by the government.

**Community governance structures** are organised through hierarchies based on gender, age, household wealth, and locally salient status related to 'primordial' social origin, and influenced by education and personal ability. These local hierarchies are key mechanisms in the reproduction of community **facilitative power**. Households and kin networks, also organised through hierarchies, form the core of the livelihood, human re/production, and social protection fields. The majority of Ethiopians are involved in such **informal security regimes**. The main causes of insecurity are scarce collective resources, life processes, local competition for scarce resources and structured inequality. The main solutions are kin-based social exchanges, 'opportunity-hoarding' on the basis of claims to superior social identity, and patchy government services.

**Government governance structures** are designed in accord with principles of hierarchical socialism. Community members are organised by party cadres in a

hierarchy of structures of control, at the bottom of which are 'cells' of around 10 households.

The two governance systems have different priorities and ways of going about things. They sometimes work independently, sometimes in collaboration, and sometimes in confrontation. In recent years government penetration of the communities has increased and there are signs of development achievements. However, people resist changes that threaten local informal security regimes without offering reliable alternatives, and they resent aspects of the government authoritarian style.

Local community and government governance structures could work more efficiently together, if mutual trust and respect were to increase. There is a potential role for enlightened donor/NGO intermediation. However, neither system is immediately compatible with the liberal and egalitarian principles implicit in current development discourses, which suggests a need for reflection and greater realism.

#### 4) Local battlefields of ideas

There is a considerable variety of opinion in these communities. Within the ideas field of action structures and agents are involved in the re/production and dissemination of **five cultural repertoires of ideas**: local traditional, local modern, new religious ideologies, government ideologies, and donor/NGO ideologies. There are other influences on local ideas which are more diffuse: 'imagined communities' involving ethnic, clan, national, and religious identities; networks of relations and interactions beyond the communities; opposition political parties; diasporas; and the national and international media.

In the heterogeneous sites people live with models of other ways of thinking, particularly in religious terms. There are contradictions at a number of levels in the ideas and narratives of the different religions: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, various versions of Protestantism, and Catholicism. The increasing influence of religious fundamentalists in all religions is making these logical contradictions more visible leading to a decline in religious tolerance. Religious differences are associated with ethnic differences and consequently affect and are affected by inter-ethnic competition for scarce material resources and local political influence.

The local battles of ideas going on in rural communities need to be understood and monitored, since they have implications for development interventions.

#### 5) Empowerment interventions

The social category with the least personal power in the communities is **'the poor'**. While females, children, young men and old people on average have less

personal power than adult men, those who are not poor have more personal power than poor people. Strategies to empower females, children and young men may not reach those who are poor. Strategies designed to empower 'the poor' must recognise that **different kinds of poor people need different empowerment strategies**.

Interventions to invest in *children* are important both for long-term community development and current individual well-being. The improvement of personal agency profiles requires a **Child Policy** covering nutrition and health, child work including child 'trafficking', the timing, structure, content and quality of education, child protection from violence and abuse, and attention to gendered child-rearing practices. Poor children need special assistance which is unlikely without the expansion of the NGO sector.

Ways of introducing new livelihood opportunities to people based in rural communities, especially the **young and landless**, need to be explored and piloted at local, regional and national levels. To improve local livelihood opportunity structures for young men and women a **Youth Enterprise / Employment Policy** should be included in *wereda* and regional 'Local Economic Development' plans for small towns.

**Female policies** should be three-pronged: to reduce the power imbalance in gender relations, to encourage participation in economic development, and to support females in their human production and reproduction roles. The current government has been committed to **empowering women** since its inception and its policies have made some impact on girls' education, women's rights to land, and provided a space for discussions of 'harmful traditional practices' which are the first step in their reduction. Government policies in this area are beginning to bear fruit but much more could be done to ensure that policies are regularly implemented in participatory and sensitive ways. They should also start to invest seriously in the other two policy areas.

Customarily **old people** were respected and feared as a result of their ability to bless and curse. Their cultural and political power began to decline during the Derg and currently only wealthy or elite old men have retained respect. The disempowerment of old people, particularly those who are poor, should be recognised and a **Policy for the Aged** developed; this is another area where expansion of the NGO sector could contribute.

Empowerment interventions are usually aimed at improving personal agency profiles and opportunity structures for disempowered people, sometimes through supporting collective action. However, there is scope for considering interventions to empower whole communities by assisting them to break out of 'low-level equilibria traps'. There are potential lessons from other countries experimenting with Local Economic Development (LED) strategies.