



Conflict Factsheet

Land Grabbing and Protests in Ethiopia

Type of conflict
Sub

Intensity
3

Conflict Locality
Eastern Africa

Time
2007 –ongoing

Countries
Ethiopia

Resources
Agricultural / Pastoral Land

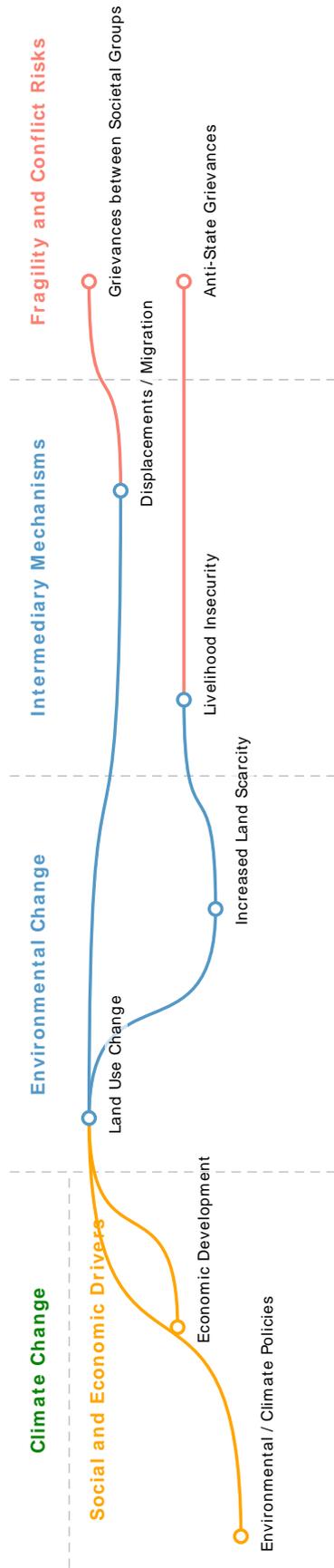


Conflict Summary

With land investment in Ethiopia intensifying due to high demand for biofuels in developed countries, local populations are being forced to leave their land and give up access to essential environmental resources and unique livelihoods – frequently without appropriate compensation from the state. These displacements have provoked strong resentment against public authorities and in some cases led to violent clashes between local communities and state security forces.



Conceptual Model



Context Factors



Agricultural / Pastoral Land

Food Insecurity

Eroded Social Contract
Insecure Land Tenure



Conflict History

Large-scale land acquisitions by foreign and domestic investors have led to shortages of arable land in Ethiopia. Often connected to environmental concerns and an increased demand for biofuels in developed countries, these projects frequently infringe on land traditionally used by local communities and thus threaten the livelihoods of some 650,000 farmers and pastoralists (Oakland Institute, 2011). What is more, some local communities have been evicted without proper warning or adequate compensation to make way for large plantations (HRW, 2012a; Dheressa, 2013), although the government claims that local communities are generally consulted prior to important land leases (Keeley et al., 2014; HRW, 2012b; Mayer et al., 2015). This has led to strained relations with public authorities and in some cases to protests and violent repression by state security forces (see HRW, 2012a).

In the Gambella region, for instance, some 70,000 indigenous people were displaced and forced to abandon their traditional lifestyle in 2011 (HRW, 2012a). Field investigation testifies to government armed forces' abuses against these communities, accompanied by rape, torture, theft, arbitrary arrests and property burning (HRW, 2012b; Oakland Institute, 2011). It is still difficult to determine precisely how many Ethiopians are affected by similar displacements nationwide.

Global food prices, biofuels and large-scale land acquisition in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is the first African recipient of land investments (UNEP, 2014). Indeed, the acquisition of its arable lands is profitable for investors as the government offers competitive prices and land with high production potential. An IIED study (2014) indicates that the government has leased over one million hectares of land between 2005 and 2012, while some reports state that up to 3.6 million hectares of land have been acquired between 2008 and 2011 alone (HRW, 2012a; Oakland Institute, 2011). These leases are financed by domestic, diaspora and foreign investors, but also by the Ethiopian government (Keeley et al., 2014; Bhatia, 2011).

A 2010 study on large-scale land investments in Africa showed that out of 26 land deals in Ethiopia, 15 were devoted to biofuels and eight to food production (Friis and Reenberg, 2010). Indeed, farmland acquisitions in Ethiopia increased significantly in 2007 in response to the food price crisis. By doing so, foreign investors could ensure profitable food production for export and thus reduce food-price fluctuations in their countries of origin (Baumgartner et al., 2015).

Another major factor driving investments in Ethiopian land was environmental concerns and an increased demand for biofuels in developed countries. These investments were made mainly by the private sector, which seized the opportunity to secure parts of this promising "green" market. As a result, by 2011 39% of foreign investments in Ethiopian land were dedicated to biofuel crops (Mayer et al., 2015; Friis and Reenberg, 2010). Paradoxically, although Ethiopia imports most of its fuel, these biofuels cannot be processed in the country due to a lack of adapted facilities and are thus exported.

Forced population displacements and anti-state grievances



While these land investments were originally supposed to increase economic output, facilitate technology transfer and help improve local infrastructures and employment opportunities, this is not what has taken place in reality. Commercial land use has often reduced food availability and compromised rural livelihoods. Local communities have been forced to resettle, sometimes without compensation from the state. The perspective of better work opportunities for local populations seldom materialises: a study considering 150 land acquisitions showed that 130 of them offered less than 50 full-time-equivalent work positions ([Vermeulen and Cotula, 2010](#)). Moreover, entire communities have been moved to areas with inappropriate living conditions in terms of nutrition, health, farmland and education ([HRW, 2012b](#); [Al Jazeera, 2014](#)). Tensions have also appeared as displaced farmers have encroached on land already occupied by other farmers ([Oakland Institute, 2011](#)).

Large-scale land leases and associated evictions have stirred up strong anti-state grievances in many parts of Ethiopia. In some areas, farmers were only informed a day before their farmland was taken by new owners, in others, they were relocated by force, leading in certain cases to heated confrontations between communities and state security forces ([HRW, 2012b](#), see also [Security Implications of the Gilgel Gibe III Dam](#)). For instance, in late 2015 farmers supported by students organised demonstrations all over Oromia state to oppose the government's policy. However, the protests were violently repressed and labelled as a terrorist threat by the police, leading to an estimated 140 deaths and multiple detentions ([Schemm, 2016](#); [HRW, 2015](#); [Amnesty International, 2016](#)).

A fragile social and political context

Dedicating Ethiopian arable land to biofuel production and exports significantly reduced the share of agricultural land available to the local population. While Ethiopia suffers from high food insecurity with 32% of its population undernourished ([FAO, 2015](#)), this massive change in the distribution of arable land is further challenging vulnerable communities and fuelling anti-state grievances.

The situation of Ethiopian farmers is further aggravated by land tenure uncertainties. The 1994 Ethiopian Constitution proclaims that all land is owned by the state and the people ([Keeley et al., 2014](#)). Therefore, land cannot be sold but leased to investors, and farmers do not have a formal title to the land they use, even after several generations. They rent communal land that can be reallocated to private investors by government decision ([Keeley et al., 2014](#); [FDRE, 2005](#)). Applicable compensation conditions in each area are not always effective and farmers seldom have fair recourse options when they are evicted. Insecure land tenure, in turn, increases communities' mistrust and stirs resentment against public authorities ([Rahmato, 2011](#); [HRW, 2012b](#); [Washington Post, 2016](#)).

More generally, the state lacks legitimacy in the eyes of many Ethiopians. Not only has the country known several civil wars, but the government has also often used violence and human rights abuses to disperse societal opposition, as seen, for example, in the violent treatment of opposition supporters in 2005 and of student protesters in 2015 ([Financial Times, 2016](#); [Amnesty International, 2016](#)).



Resolution Efforts

The Ethiopian state has attempted to provide a better legal framework for land rights. However, implementing it is likely to prove challenging, as government authorities at different levels often fail to apply it correctly. Large-scale acquisitions of Ethiopian farmland by Ethiopian and foreign investors are still subject to wide criticism from international organisations and human rights advocacy groups, which call on the government to respect Ethiopians' rights.

Efforts to improve land tenure security and strengthen farmers' land rights

The Ethiopian state has undertaken land reforms to improve land tenure security for its farmers. Since 1998, land registration and certification programmes have been implemented across several regions issuing over 20 million certificates for individual plots with the implication of village land committees (Deininger, 2008; USAID, 2011). An impact study conducted in Amhara indicates that the economic benefits of this process substantially exceeded its costs (Deininger et al., 2009). Rural landholders appreciate this cadastral-based method of land certification insofar as it enhances land tenure security, and thus allows them to develop long-term land exploitation approaches without being threatened by unannounced evictions. Thanks to this programme, the number of disputes over land has decreased.

The implementation of this system has also helped to establish land registration standards and raise public awareness about land laws, notably small-holders right to proper compensation in case of forced displacement (USAID, 2011). However, the credibility of land certificates is sometimes brought into question in cases where title records are not well maintained (Deininger et al., 2009). The system has had a positive impact overall, and the government is currently piloting an advanced second-stage land certification scheme. Although the new programme provides a better basis for land administration via additional spatial data and digital records, it remains unclear whether it will improve tenure security for local farmers (Bezu and Holden, 2014; DAI, 2015).

Regarding land acquisition, the Ethiopian formal approval process requires an environmental impact assessment and consultation with affected communities. Although consultation aims to gather local people's opinions, government representatives at the district level retain the exclusive right to make formal decisions regarding land transfers (Vermeulen and Cotula, 2010). This has led to a situation where communities are de facto often excluded from decision-making processes. On the other hand, local civil society initiatives have helped to empower clan leaders to defend their communities' rights and amplify their voices. Their petitioning called on local government administrations to reconsider projects, which resulted in the formation of joint consultative meetings and halted land allocation to investors in some cases (Booker et al., 2015).

Civil society groups also work on informing local populations of their rights since laws in their favour do exist, but are often misinterpreted by authorities, poorly enforced or simply unknown to local community members. For instance, the organisation MELCA is holding legal workshops to raise rights' awareness and build local capacity in the Sheka Zone (Booker et al., 2015).



As these initiatives illustrate, systematic dialogue between all parties can substantially enhance land tenure security: the private sector, local communities and civil society groups can be involved in policy decisions and the government is able to benefit from other stakeholders' input to develop sound land reforms. Accountability and public consultation are in this sense essential for a functional land allocation system (Yusuf et al., 2012; Booker et al., 2015).

Ensuring that relocated communities receive proper compensation

The dire situation of displaced communities has received international attention. In 2012 the UN's Committee on World Food Security issued its Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forest in the Context of National Food Security. Considered a "milestone achievement", the guidelines encourage governments to improve their land rights, remind them of their duty to ensure prompt compensation in case of displacements, and provide investors with best practices (FAO, 2012; Guardian, 2012). At the national level, the Ethiopian Human Rights Action Plan of 2013 guarantees the right to proper compensation in case of displacement, as established by the Federal Rural Land Expropriation Proclamation No. 455/2005, (National Human Rights Action Plan, 2013).

Despite this legal framework, forced evictions remain common. Poor management of leasing projects is often attributed to corruption and administrative failures at the local level, as was the case in 2016, after protests erupted in Oromia following plans to expand the capital Addis Ababa to Oromia territories (see Washington Post, 2016).

In order to ensure a better protection of farmers' rights, the legal framework could be made more transparent, bringing stronger property rights and allowing communities to appeal against decisions of local authorities (Yusuf et al., 2012). The local level of administration in Ethiopia is, in principle, well adapted to this task, but measures need to be taken to ensure it remains impartial, accountable and well-coordinated with national policies (USAID, 2011).

Raising awareness about land tenure insecurity and displaced populations

In addition, land tenure insecurity in Ethiopia has also mobilised numerous external actors. International organisations and local civil society groups are calling for more sustained efforts to urge the government to ensure stronger land rights for farmers and to stop ignoring their customary use rights (FAO, 2012; GRAIN, 2011). The former governor of Gambella, Okello Akway Ochalla, actively fought for local communities' rights to land, but was arrested as a political dissenter (Financial Times, 2016; Oakland Institute, 2016a; GRAIN, 2016). His unfair treatment has raised voices internationally, in the US Congress among others (Oakland Institute, 2016b; The Daily Journalist, 2016).

Many actions are undertaken to raise awareness about human rights violations of forcefully displaced populations. Human rights organisations try to improve their conditions and discourage the state's arbitrary actions via public campaigns, protest letters to officials and petitions (GRAIN, 2011; Cultural Survival, 2012; Oakland Institute, 2012).



Moreover, representatives of other countries have called on Ethiopian authorities to change their approach. While the US blamed the Ethiopian government for reacting with violence to the 2016 demonstrations, the European Parliament, concerned by human rights violations, adopted a resolution on the situation in Ethiopia ([Washington Post, 2016](#); [European Parliament, 2016](#)).

Increasing the amount of available farmland

Facing land shortages, Ethiopia has also committed to restoring one-sixth of its total land area and combatting soil degradation, which accounts for deforestation and huge economic losses, as well as having serious impacts on food security ([World Resources Institute, 2014](#)). Restoring this land is another step toward reducing land scarcity and easing tensions between local communities, investors and the government.

Downscaling land large-scale leases

At present, due to the poor return on some investments, the Ethiopian Agricultural Investment and Land Administration Agency has decided to put its leasing activities on hold and gain a better understanding of why leased land is not being used to its full potential ([Walta Info, 2016](#)). Indeed, economic growth arising from large-scale investment has been lower than the state expected. Less than half of the leased land has been developed by investors so far ([USAID, 2011](#); [Yusuf et al., 2012](#); [Reuters, 2016](#)). While investors are often leaving less profitable land unexploited, in some cases there are overlapping claims to the same tracts of land ([Yusuf et al., 2012](#); [Reuters, 2016](#)). The slowdown of large-scale land acquisitions in Ethiopia is temporarily reducing pressures on local smallholders. However, it remains to be seen whether this trend will continue in the coming years.



Intensities & Influences



INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity



Human Suffering



INFLUENCES

Environmental Influences



Societal Influences



Violent Conflict

Yes



Salience with nation

Municipal



Cross Border Mass Displacement

No



Resolution Success

Grievance Resolution

Grievances have been partially addressed.





Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

<p>Compensation</p> <p>The Ethiopian Human Rights Action Plan of 2013 guarantees the right to proper compensation in case of displacement. Despite this legal framework, forced evictions remain common and are often attributed to corruption and administrative failures.</p> <hr/>	0
<p>Social inclusion & empowerment</p> <p>In an effort to improve land tenure security for its farmers, the Ethiopian state has implemented registration and certification programs. These programs have helped decrease the number of disputes over land. Furthermore, the government is currently developing a new program that will provide a better basis for land administration via additional spatial data and digital records.</p> <hr/>	2
<p>Environmental restoration & protection</p> <p>Ethiopia is committed to restoring one-sixth of its total land area and combat soil degradation in order to reduce land scarcity and ease tensions between local communities, investors and the government.</p> <hr/>	2
<p>Promoting social change</p> <p>The conflict has prompted local civil society initiatives to inform local populations of their rights, and empower clan leaders to defend their communities. Numerous international organizations have also urged the government to ensure stronger land rights for farmers, and have undertaken efforts to raise awareness about human rights violations of forcefully displaced populations.</p> <hr/>	2

Resources and Materials

Conflict References

[Security Implications of the Gilgel Gibe III Dam, Ethiopia](#)

References with URL

[Al Jazeera. \(January 30, 2014\). Ethiopia – Land for sale. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)

[Amnesty International. \(January 14, 2016\). Ethiopia: Civil society groups urge the international community to address killing of Oromo protesters.](#)

[Baumgartner, P., Braun \(von\), J., Abebaw, D. & Müller, M. \(2015\). Impacts of Large-scale Land Investments on Income, Prices, and Employment: Empirical Analyses in Ethiopia, World Development, 72, 175–190.](#)

[Bezu, S. & Holden, S. \(2014\). Demand for second-stage land certification in Ethiopia: Evidence from household panel data, Land Use Policy, 41, 193-205.](#)

[Bhatia, J. \(May 18, 2011\). Ethiopia: Are “Land Grab” Deals a Path to Food Security? Global Voices. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)



- [Booker, S., Knight, R. & Brinkhurst, M. \(2015\). Protecting Community Lands & Resources in Africa: Grassroots Advocates' Strategies & Lessons. Natural Justice and Namati.](#)
- [Burgis, T. \(March 1, 2016\). The great land rush. Ethiopia: The billionaire's farm. Financial Times. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Cultural Survival. \(2012\). Take Action: Stop Land Grabbing in Ethiopia.](#)
- [DAL. \(November 18, 2015\). LIFT Programme Issues Second-Level Land Certificates in Ethiopia. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Deininger, K. \(2008\). Implementing Low-Cost Rural Land Certification: The Case of Ethiopia. Agricultural & Rural Development Notes, 34.](#)
- [Deininger, K., Ali, D.A. & Alemu, T. \(2009\). Impacts of Land Certification on Tenure Security, Investment, and Land Markets. Evidence from Ethiopia. Environment for Development.](#)
- [Dheressa, D.K. \(2013\). The Socio-Economic and Environmental Impacts of Large Scale \(Agricultural\) Land Acquisition on Local Livelihoods: A Case Study in Bako Tibe Woreda of Oromia Region, Ethiopia.](#)
- [EJOLT. \(2012\). Patterns of global biomass trade. Implications for food sovereignty and socioenvironmental conflicts.](#)
- [European Parliament. \(2016\). Resolution on the situation in Ethiopia.](#)
- [FAO, IFAD & WFP. \(2015\). The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015. Meeting the 2015 international hunger targets: taking stock of uneven progress.](#)
- [FAO. \(2012\). Voluntary guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of land, fisheries and forest in the context of national food security.](#)
- [Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. \(2013\). National Human Rights Action Plan, 2013-2015](#)
- [Friis, C. & Reenberg, A. \(2010\). Land grab in Africa: Emerging land system drivers in a teleconnected world. GLP Report.](#)
- [GRAIN. \(December 6, 2011\). GRAIN calls for end to land grabbing at Swedish Parliament. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [GRAIN. \(March 15, 2016\). Stop the criminalization of environmental and human rights defenders! Free Ethiopian political prisoners! \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Human Rights Watch. \(2012\). "Waiting Here for Death" Forced Displacement and "Villagization" in Ethiopia's Gambella Region.](#)
- [Human Rights Watch. \(December 18, 2015\). Ethiopia: Lethal Force Against Protesters. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Human Rights Watch. \(January 16, 2012\). Ethiopia: Forced Relocations Bring Hunger, Hardship. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Keeley, J., Seide, W.M., Eid, A., & Kidewa, A.L. \(2014\). Large-scale land deals in Ethiopia: Scale, trends, features and outcomes to date. IIED.](#)
- [Maasho, A. \(March 25, 2016\). Ethiopia body suspends farm lease programme after poor results. Reuters Africa. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Minnick, A., Woldemariam, T., Reij, C., Stolle, F., Landsberg, F. & Anderson, J. \(October 21, 2014\). Ethiopia Commits to Restore One-Sixth of its Land. World Resources Institute. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Oakland Institute. \(2011\). Understanding land investment deals in Africa. Country report: Ethiopia.](#)
- [Oakland Institute. \(2016\). Action on Behalf of Indigenous Land Rights Leader in Ethiopia. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Oakland Institute. \(2016\). Contact Your Member of Congress to Sign a Letter Urging President Obama to Help Free Okello Akway Ochalla. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Oakland Institute. \(May 17, 2012\). Institutions Urge Obama to Address 'Land Grabbing' Issue in Ethiopia. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Rahmato, D. \(2011\). Land to Investors: Large-scale Land Transfers in Ethiopia. African Books Collective.](#)
- [Schemm, P. \(January 14, 2016\). Ethiopia confronts its worst ethnic violence in years. Washington Post. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Tran, M. \(March 14, 2012\). Negotiators reach consensus on global land governance guidelines. The Guardian. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [UNEP. \(2014\). Assessing Global Land Use: Balancing Consumption with Sustainable Supply.](#)
- [USAID. \(2011\). Ethiopia – Property Rights and Resource Governance Profile.](#)
- [Vermeulen, S. & Cotula, L. \(2010\). Over the heads of local people: consultation, consent, and recompense in large-scale land deals for biofuels projects in Africa. The Journal of Peasant Studies, 37\(4\), 899-916.](#)
- [Walta Info. \(March 22, 2016\). Agency quits offering land for large scale agricultural investments. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Yacob, B. \(2015\). Family Urges Norway to take action for the release of Okello Ochalla. The Daily Journalist. \[Accessed 2016-04-25\]](#)
- [Yusuf, B., Tefera, S. & Zerihun, A. \(2009\). Land Lease Policy in Addis Ababa.](#)

References without URL

FDRE. (2005). Federal land administration and use proclamation. Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. No. 456/2005.



Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/land-grabbing-ethiopia>