

UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Discussion Paper 13

**CONSTRAINTS TO ENVIRONMENTAL  
REHABILITATION THROUGH PEOPLE'S  
PARTICIPATION IN THE NORTHERN  
ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS**

by  
Michael Ståhl

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United Nations Research Institute  
for Social Development  
Palais des Nations  
1211 Geneva 10  
Switzerland

Tel. (022) 798.84.00/798.98.50  
Fax (022) 740.07.91  
Telex 28 96 96

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## Preface

The following paper reports on the environmental problems facing the people of the northern Ethiopian highlands, ongoing attempts to arrest environmental degradation in the area, and the factors which influence the outcome of such attempts. The paper was prepared as part of the UNRISD research programme on **Sustainable Development through People's Participation in Resource Management**, which explores the dynamics of local-level initiatives concerned with environmental degradation, examines and analyses traditionally sustainable resource management practices, and investigates the factors which facilitate or constrain community participation in externally initiated resource management projects and programmes. The programme is being co-ordinated within UNRISD by Jessica Vivian.

Michael Ståhl, the author of this paper, has been involved for many years in development research in Africa. He has been a lecturer of political science in Ethiopia, a Senior Research Fellow with BRALUP in Tanzania, a Senior Programme Officer with SIDA, and the Director of the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies. He is presently a Research Officer with the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC).

The paper opens with a discussion of the context of environmental degradation in the Ethiopian highlands, and of the government resource conservation programmes. Attempts to arrest soil erosion and regenerate vegetation in this region are supported by the World Food Programme and other international agencies, and are organized as food-for-work projects. The author demonstrates that the peasants are well aware, not only that soil erosion is having deleterious effects on their crop yields, but also that their own agricultural practices are hastening soil erosion. Nevertheless, the peasants are unwilling to undertake soil conservation measures unless they are supported by food-for-work programmes.

Local people's participation is crucial for the success of soil conservation activities in rural areas. The reluctance of the farmers of the Ethiopian highlands to participate in soil conservation initiatives unless they are externally supported, therefore, means that efforts to rehabilitate the environment will be successful only in the limited areas which can be reached by food-for-work programmes. In his analysis of the factors which underlie this position taken by the peasants, the author emphasizes structural factors. In spite of the celebrated land reform in Ethiopia, peasants do not own the land they till, and government villagization and resettlement programmes have left the people with little certainty even over their continued land tenure.

The author gives several examples of the coercive and authoritarian nature of government policies in the rural areas of Ethiopia. He argues that the attitude of the peasants towards soil conservation, which some have interpreted as "careless", is the result of their "alienation from the whole official development strategy." The state in Ethiopia has in recent years appropriated resources from rural areas, not in order to improve conditions there, but rather for "consolidating the bureaucracy and waging war on political opponents". Peasants are therefore understandably reluctant to engage in conservation efforts which have no short-term benefits, because such efforts entail immediate costs, and the likelihood of their collecting the long-term benefits is small.

The paper closes by outlining a possible way towards sustainability in the Ethiopian highlands. The author demonstrates that there are real possibilities for environmental rehabilitation in the area, based on widespread people's participation. To bring about such an outcome, however, the government will have to orchestrate a political formula which will make possible both the co-operation of the peasants and increased support from external sources.

Ongoing UNRISD work on the theme of sustainable development and people's participation will investigate further some of the issues raised by this paper. As one of the programme's areas of focus, the structural factors which constrain the full participation of people in resource management and conservation projects will be examined. Particular emphasis will be placed on the implications of the UNRISD studies for national and international development policy.

June 1990

Dharam Ghai  
Director

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This paper, which discusses environmental degradation in the northern highlands of Ethiopia, is a contribution to UNRISD's programme on people's participation in sustainable resource management. Many forms of "participation" are relevant to the topic of environmental sustainability, but this paper focuses on one form in particular: a programme in which local people are involved in massive campaigns to dig trenches, move stones and plant trees in exchange for food. The emphasis of the paper is on examining the policies and politics which hamper a more responsible participation by the people of the Ethiopian highlands in the rehabilitation of their farmlands, pastures and hillsides.

The first section of the paper provides a general description of the character of environmental degradation in the highlands, as well as of the policies designed to combat it. Examples are drawn from Wollo region, which has become notorious for its repeated crop failures and famines. The paper then discusses the potential for environmental rehabilitation, with a particular concentration on government policies and people's responses to them. The analysis emphasizes these human and institutional factors because degradation and rehabilitation are here considered to be consequences of decision-making by land users who, directly or indirectly, act in response to government policy.<sup>1</sup>

The presentation refers to the period 1985-1988. Since that time, vast parts of the northern highlands south of Tigray have been overrun by opposition movements and government programmes have ground to a halt.

### Trends in Natural Resources Use

The thick volcanic soils in the Ethiopian highlands<sup>2</sup> have high inherent fertility and once supported large forests with diversified flora and fauna (Westphal, 1975). The cool climate and ample rainfall attracted early human settlement, and mixed agriculture and stock keeping emerged three thousand years ago. The use of draft animals and

## Introduction

1. This conceptualization draws on the theoretical frameworks outlined in Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) and in Dixon, James and Sherman (1990).

## Environmental Degradation in Ethiopia

2. Highlands are defined as being above 1,500 metres.

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