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Youth as Environmental Custodians: A Potential Tragedy or A Sustainable Business and Livelihood Model?

By

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Abstract

Youth unemployment and migration is a growing challenge that needs more political attention in many countries in the world, particularly countries with rapid population growth and economic transformation. Proactively mobilizing the youth as a resource in the creation of sustainable livelihoods can potentially be a win-win-win solution that Ethiopia is currently attempting with its new youth employment strategy and high ambitions to transform the country's economy into a Green Economy. If it succeeds, it can set an example for other countries in the world to follow. This paper gives and overview of the youth program and the basic ideas and challenges.

Key words: Youth; youth migration; unemployment; area exclosures; common property resource management, environmental custodians; collective action; business model.

JEL codes: Q15; Q23; J08; J21; M13.

Migration from Africa and the Middle East to Europe has increased sharply in 2016 mostly due to wars and social instability but partly also due to increasing mobility, development of migration routes with migration becoming a lucrative business for intermediaries, and by unemployment and hopes for a better life in Europe. Youths may even be sent by their parents, who hope they can support their families with remittance incomes this way.

Ethiopia's population is passing 100 million in 2016, and grows at a rate of more than 2.5 million per year (CIA World Fact Book 2015). Many Ethiopian youth, especially young girls have migrated (mostly illegally) to Arabian countries, particularly Saudi Arabia to find employment. Most of them have worked as maids in the homes of people. Their working conditions have been characterized as "slave contracts" where they have very weak rights, work seven days a week from early morning until late night, and there are many stories about harassment and sexual abuse. Some cases have caught the attention of media due to violent episodes and in 2014 Saudi Arabia reacted and returned 150 000 illegal migrants to Ethiopia by dumping them by plane in Addis Ababa. We may wonder what happened to these youth after they returned.

Within Ethiopia still more than 80% of the population lives in rural areas. The amount of arable land has reduced to 0.17 ha/capita by 2013 including the urban population and is 0.21 ha/capita in rural areas (FAO 2015). This has resulted in growing landlessness among the youth even though they as rural residents with a constitutional right to access land for livelihood for free. The rapidly growing number of landless youth is one of the most important challenges that Ethiopia faces. Bezu and Holden (2014) showed that in a densely populated area, Wollaita in Sothern Ethiopia, which is among the most densely populated areas in Ethiopia with very small farm sizes, had hardly any outmigration before 2007. Between 2007 and 2012 more than 30% of the youth had migrated out and a large share of the remaining youth planned to leave agriculture. Most of these youth had migrated to urban areas; many were shoe shiners and coffee vendors on the streets in Addis Ababa and smaller towns (Bezu and Holden 2015).

Increasing pressures on communal lands: Policy responses

The increasing population pressure due to rapid population growth has caused shrinking farm sized and increasing pressures on communal lands with severe degradation of the land resources including forests and grazing lands as a result.

Two policy responses to this have been to invest in conservation of watersheds through community level mobilization of labor for soil and water conservation and to rehabilitate degraded land by "exclosure" of such degraded lands from interference by humans and animals. The communities themselves have taken the decisions to protect such areas from encroachment. The number of such

exclosures has increased over time and started in the Tigray region. It is estimated that Ethiopia had 143,000 ha of exclosures in 1996 which increased to over 3 million ha in 2014 (Lemenih and Kassa 2014). 1.54 million ha is estimated to be located in Tigray. Through protection and building of soil and water conservation structures the communal lands have gained water holding capacity and the local populations in successful communities have started to utilize the collected water and groundwater for irrigation purposes and have thus boosted their agricultural production and food security. All households with adult able-bodied persons had to work 20 days per year for free for the community and most of this labor was spent on such conservation activities. In the beginning it was, however, not clear how the benefits from these communal lands should be shared within communities.

The compulsory labor contribution by adult able-bodied persons was recently increased from 20 to 40 days per year per person. Recently, much of this labor has been invested in building bench terraces, which with access to irrigation and planting of high-value crops can raise the productivity of such lands many times while soil erosion is controlled.

Landless youth and allocation of rehabilitated lands

From 2010-11 communities in Tigray started to allocate parts of the rehabilitated area exclosures to youth groups as a new approach to provide land to landless youth. By 2015 this has become a new policy of the region. We implemented a quick informal study in a few locations in Tigray to investigate the potential and modalities of this approach to providing land to youth.

Figure 1. A rehabilitated grazing land allocated to a youth group for fruit production with irrigation in Adwa district.

We visited Adwa district in Tigray where almost all communal lands have been transformed into exclosures. The area was estimated to be about 35,000 ha out of 65,000 ha total area in the district. The total population in the district was about 113,000 of which about 16,000 were registered as landless youth. They had by 2015 allocated 1,835 ha exclosure area to 4,277 youth that were organized in groups with 10-20 members in each group. This implies that about 5-6% of the exclosure area is allocated to 4.1% of the population. And that about 20-25% of the exclosure area may be sufficient to meet the needs of the remaining registrered landless youth in the district. However, landless youth are also organized on youth groups to do other types of businesses such as mining of sand and stones and with the construction boom in Ethiopia this may be an area with bigger potential.

We visited another district in south-eastern Tigray, Raya Azebo with a population of 158,000 of which 32,000 were registered as landless youth on the waiting list for getting land. Formation of youth groups for provision of area exclosures was limited to fewer municipalities here (3 of 20) but the success of the first groups has created stronger interest among the youth themselves whose motivation was one of the most important constraints in the beginning. About 8,300 youth had been allocated about 3,900 ha. In all, more than 12,000 youth are organized in groups in the district by 2015.

Figure 2. A rehabilitated gulley (under SLMP II) allocated to youth groups in Raya Azebo. This group has planted fruit trees and vegetables.

The fact that 2,500 of the 150,000 youth that were sent back from Saudi Arabia two years ago came from this district and returned to the district also created an urgent need to find alternative employment for these. Now, two years later about 1,600 of these remain in the woreda and many are belonging to youth groups while about 900 have again migrated out.

If these youth groups succeed these few figures illustrate that this may be a scalable approach that can provide a livelihood for a huge number of youth in the future. This will also substantially reduce the extent of international migration from Ethiopia.

A youth group as a formalized enterprise

The formalization of youth groups as legal entities falls under the Federal Proclamation on Cooperatives. Primary cooperatives are limited liability organizations. The law regulates their rights and responsibilities and how they organize themselves. The Cooperative Union in a region implements the law and is responsible for the registration of cooperatives. Each youth group must be registered as a primary cooperative and there are set minimum limits for the number of members in such a primary cooperative depending on the type of activity they are performing. The Cooperative Union is also responsible for ensuring auditing of the primary cooperatives.

When youth group cooperatives are to be formed the Youth Association in a district is responsible for recruiting the youth into groups to take on specific activities within each municipality. Only resident landless youth from a municipality (kebelle/tabia) can become a member of a youth group cooperative in that same municipality. Each youth cooperative must have a chairman, a vice chairman, a secretary, an accountant and a treasury. These are elected for three years by the general assembly of the group. Each youth group must have a business plan that is accepted by the municipality and district offices. The choice of activity for each group is decided by agricultural and other experts at district and municipality level based on the suitability of the area and the local preferences. Credit institutions may provide loans for necessary initial investments. Training of various types is organized and provided by the Youth Association in collaboration with technical experts to develop the skills of the youth groups and enhance their performance.

Income activities and challenges

Most groups are assigned with one main activity. Such activities include animal fattening (using the rehabilitated area for cut and carry fodder collection and partly for grazing, bee keeping, fruit tree production, irrigated production, and timber tree production (eucalyptus), as the most common activities. The size of these groups was typically between 10 and 25 youth. The aim was to have 50-50 males and females but the ratio was more commonly 60-40 or 70-30. Another type of

activities involved mining of stones and sand but these groups were of temporary nature, typically for one year during which the mining should help the youth to accumulate capital for another activity and they were required to save 50% of the income in the bank. When this deposit has reached EB 20,000 per youth they have to stop and graduate and go into another business with their accumulated starting capital. They may get follow-up training for the new business they want to go into. One of the problems is, however, that these youth may want to migrate even out of the country.

Figure 3. Youth group with bee hives in Raya Azebo.

Different models were used for increasing the benefits to the youth groups from the exclosure areas by defining specific development plans for each youth group's allocated area. The youth group then had to make investments on the area according to this plan. These specific plans include enrichment with more valuable trees such as fruit trees and timber trees, introducing bee hives and bee fodder plants, and grass production for fattening of animals.

Figure 4. Area exclosure enriched with eucalyptus trees by youth group which also has bee hives and has planted bee fodder plants.

One of the challenges the youth faced was that the exclosure areas give limited income and other benefits in the first years and they therefore needed complementary income sources. The interesting finding was that a large share of those groups we visited were renting in land from farmers in the area (sharecropping) while others were construction workers. Those that had oxen were those that were able to become tenants by renting in land in the neighborhood.

Tenure security and land rights

Another aspect of provision of land to these youth groups was that allocation was conditional on performance and this was monitored regularly over the first two years before the group was allocated a joint legal document approving their right to this land. This is not an official land certificate but it enhances the tenure security of the group, which will be given a formal certificate after further documentation that they manage the area in a sustainable way and according to expectations.

Between Hardin and Ostrom

We may wonder whether allocation of rehabilitated forests and grazing lands to youth groups will lead to a "Tragedy of the Commons" (Hardin 1968) or whether such groups are able to cooperate and establish sustainable livelihoods more in line with the "design principles" of Elinor Ostrom (1990; 2008). This is one of our research questions that we hope to find an answer to in our ongoing youth group survey. We are investigating how satisfied the youth groups themselves are with the tenure and other arrangements and how well the internal cooperation functions. Our preliminary findings from a smaller number of groups indicates that the groups conform quite closely with Ostrom's design principles and are satisfied with their own performance. There are, however, some dropouts due to lack of motivation and preferences for migration to search for alternative livelihood. We are investigating many factors that may explain the level of success or failure of the groups and their performance as environmental custodians. We believe our findings will be valuable in the fine-tuning of the ambitious policy to transform Ethiopia's economy into a Green Economy with the youth onboard.

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