

Moving people, shifting problems. The impact of state-enforced lowland-upland resettlement on land use and natural resources in Ethiopia.

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Increasing population pressure and deteriorating ecological conditions led to severe resource degradation in lower central Ethiopia. Agricultural output is low and unstable making large sections of the local population vulnerable to chronic food insecurity.

Ever since the 1970s, the Ethiopian governments carry out large scale resettlement programs in which peasants are relocated from lower central Ethiopia to the upland areas in the Southwest of the country. The areas of destination are less densely populated and still widely covered with rainforests on relatively fertile soils.

The rationale behind state-enforced resettlement is to reduce population pressure and to facilitate resource rehabilitation in lower central Ethiopia and at the same time to provide peasants with a better livelihood by making use of ‘underutilized’ resources in the mountainous forested areas. Massive resettlement programs were started and implemented by the communistic-inspired Derg regime in the 1970s and 80s. The new ruling government under the EPRDF, however, shows a prolonged commitment to this policy. Currently, there are plans to resettle a total of about 7 million people in the midterm, in different parts of the country. Out of that, an estimated 400,000 people have already been resettled.

Advocates of this policy argue that it is the most cost-efficient policy option to cope with resource degradation and food insecurity in the long-term. In the past, however, resettlement did not prove to solve the problems in the areas of origin, while simultaneously posing massive irrevocable ecological and socio-economic problems to the areas of destination. The natural land cover is heavily disturbed by direct and indirect settlement activities leading to the impairment of ecosystem functions, soil degradation and losses of biodiversity. Beyond that, the disruption of indigenous land use and management systems and local livelihood systems cause conflicts between indigenous locals and settlers.

