



# Impacts of Change in Customary Rangeland Governance Institutions on Pastoral Livelihoods of the Borana Plateau, Southern Ethiopia

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## Research Brief

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### Abstract

*Pastoralism is founded on extensive livestock keeping, seasonal herd mobility, and flexible resource use and is governed by strong customary institutions known as the 'the Gadaa System.' It has endured for centuries as the major livelihood strategy for Borana pastoralists in Southern Ethiopia. However, today, these age-old pastoral systems and core customary institutions are under mounting pressure from a multitude of stressors. In particular, recent changes in government policies, notably establishment of peasant associations and expansion of agriculture, are affecting the livelihoods and rangeland use arrangements of the area. This study examines the impacts of the institutional changes on pastoral livelihoods and on the future of rangeland governance systems in the plateau. Analysis of data collected from household surveys and focus group discussions revealed that pastoral livelihoods in Borana are highly dependent on and mingled with local customary institutions. To maintain the future of sustainable pastoralism on the plateau, these institutions need to be reinforced and integrated into the emerging government administration.* 

### Changes in government policy and land-use impact customary rangeland governance institutions

The Gadaa system is an elaborate and all-embracing indigenous institution of the Borana pastoral people of Southern Ethiopia that has survived for centuries. Under the Borana Gadaa system, every aspect of pastoral livelihoods, including access to and management of rangeland and water wells, seasonal mobility, conflict management and mutual assistances, are governed by the rules and regulations of the customary institution led by Aba Gadaa (the father) and his subordinates. The strong hierarchical structures, kinships and social ties have been central in enforcing the Gadaa's decisions among multiple users. With such intricate and flexible governance systems, the Boranas have been able to freely move their livestock, manage conflicts and efficiently use rangeland resources even during periods of severe droughts. The Gadaa customary codes were thus the backbone of the long-standing communal resource use and management systems of the Borana plateau.

However, the long-established customary rangeland governance and management systems are now weakening due to several internal and external stress factors. Recent changes in government policies, notably establishment of peasant associations and expansion of agriculture, are affecting the livelihoods and rangeland use arrangements of the area. This study examines the impacts of the institutional changes on pastoral livelihoods and on the future of rangeland governance systems in the plateau.



Maize crop field at Hidi-Ale, Yabello district. March 2013. (Photo credit: by Yibeltal Wassie)





*Pastoralist Settlement at Harboru, Dire district. March 2013.  
(Photo credit: by Yibeltal Wassie)*

### **Data collected from household surveys and focus groups give insight into changes in livelihood**

The study was carried out in eight pastoral and agro-pastoral villages from four districts in the Borana zone. Researchers randomly selected 120 sample households, representing three socio-economic classes, to complete a face-to-face interview with trained enumerators. In order to understand the whole picture of the pastoralist livelihood in relation to the research problem and to complement the data from the household survey, separate focus group discussions were held in four of the villages (two of which were agro-pastoralist and two of which were pure pastoralist). A total of 10-12 participants, representing all socio-economic classes and genders, participated in each of the FGDs. Lastly, researchers completed extensive field observations to understand the existing conditions of pastoralism on the Borana in relation to rangeland management and utilization, disturbance factors in customary rangeland and water use arrangements, livestock population and composition, herd size and mobility, pastoralist settlements and sedentarization, impacts of pastoral policy shifts and development interventions on pastoralist livelihoods and assets.

The robust qualitative and quantitative data collected from the four districts was analyzed using relevant descriptive and inferential analysis tools. A frequency index value analysis with the help of SPSS software was used to rank and measure the influence of factors driving the change in institutional arrangements and roles of the Gadaa customary institutions.

### **Livestock assets, incomes and productivity decline with the weakening of customary institutions**

Findings of this research indicate that the Gadaa system is weakening primarily due to the establishment of peasant associations (PAs), which are governed by formal administrations that replace the traditional pastoral 'Gendas,' or local clan-based administrative units. This has led to the overtaking of roles and power from the customary system by the

PA-led hybrid institution, 'Core,' which is a committee composed of authorities from the formal administration and the customary system.

Government-led Core institutions are now replacing the Gadaa system, which has been critical in sustaining pastoralism on the Borana plateau. Findings show that today only 25-40% of rangeland management is governed by the Gadaa system, while the hybrid government institutions govern 60-75%. This means the Gadaa system's role in rangeland management has declined by about 60 percent during the last 10 years. Similarly, the critical roles of the Gadaa institutions in managing inter- and intra-clan conflicts over resources, as well as management of seasonal rangelands, has weakened by more than 50 percent. The change in the role and functions of the Gadaa institutions is especially pronounced in the erosion of the Borana people's traditional social support systems, which have been vital for the survival of the poor and women-headed households, especially during drought and severe resource scarcity.

Linear modeling shows that the weakening of customary institutions is strongly correlated to a decline in pastoral livelihood assets (livestock holding size) and an increase in the frequency of resource conflicts. This is particularly true in pastoral communities where livestock is the most dominant means of people's livelihoods. In addition, the weakening of customary institutions has been strongly linked to the loss and reduction of traditional access to communal rangelands. As a result, there is an increasing shortage of grazing lands, constrained livestock mobility and undesired conflicts over resources and trespassing of private properties. This in turn has an undeniable impact on livestock holding, productivity and income of livestock herding for the Borana community.

The establishment of the formal government administrative structures and development interventions in turn has led to the expansion of agriculture and to the commercialization of livestock products, creating communities and livelihood strategies that are not strictly abided by



*Private area enclosures, Harallo, Dire district. March 2013.  
(Photo credit: by Yibeltal Wassie)*

the customary Gadaa rules. In addition, private ownership of communal rangelands, especially by the elite for establishing private rangeland enclosures or agricultural fields, is undermining and eroding the legitimacy of customary laws and communal resource-use arrangements. The blend of all this has resulted in the gradual weakening of the customary institutions.

### **Current and future pastoral development policy should recognize customary institutions**

The once-dominant Gadda system and its critical roles and functions in the Borana pastoral communities are now being bypassed. Customary institutions are being replaced by the hybrid institution and will most likely be overtaken by formal administration in the near future. Indeed, the principle of integrating the customary institutions with the newly emerging formal government administration has brought some positive changes for pastoral communities by opening up access to education, better health services, livelihood diversification and technology transfer. However, most of the current trends of the rapid shift in institutional arrangements have also degraded the power of the customary institutions that are vital for enforcing strong resource management rules, which enable the pastoral communities to efficiently utilize communal resources and regulate seasonal movements and social relations.

Based on these negative impacts, current and future pastoral development policy should recognize and reinforce Borana's customary governance and management institutions when appropriate instead of completely replacing them with new systems that are incompatible with local livelihoods and social systems. By incorporating technical

and social dimensions, customary authorities can better mobilize and manage rangelands, thus revitalizing the critical functions and legitimacy of the Gadaa system. Integrating the customary institutions and the new Cores in broader regional development plans and livestock production system improvements is essential for pastoralism to remain a productive means of livelihood for over a million Borana pastoral communities. 🐄

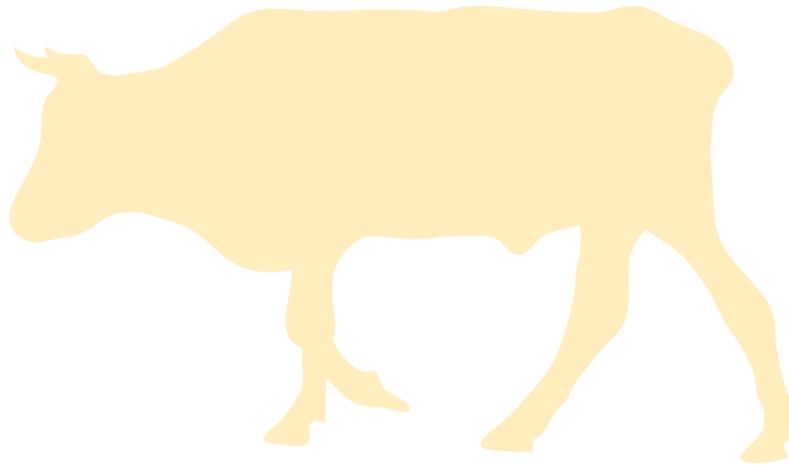
*“By incorporating technical and social dimensions, customary authorities can better mobilize and manage rangelands, thus revitalizing the critical functions and legitimacy of the Gadaa system.”*



*Cattle herd. March 2013. (Photo credit: by Yibeltal Wassie)*

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*Proposals are selected based on their potential to make livestock production systems more resilient to increasing climate variability and severity. At the end of one year, TIRI scholars are expected to demonstrate concrete outcomes and real potential for future impact. The 10 selected East Africa TIRI scholars and the 18 selected Nepal TIRI scholars are addressing research problems on various livestock and climate research themes.*



**Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Collaborative Research on Adapting Livestock Systems to Climate Change is dedicated to catalyzing and coordinating research that improves the livelihoods of livestock producers affected by climate change by reducing vulnerability and increasing adaptive capacity.**

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