

# The Political Economy of Agricultural Extension Policy in Ethiopia: Economic Growth and Political Control

Kassahun Berhanu and Colin Poulton\*

*This article argues that, in Ethiopia, the aim to transform the performance of smallholder agricultural production is driven by the twin imperatives of economic growth and political control. The agricultural extension programme – the largest and fastest growing in the continent – has been central to this strategy, and the unparalleled investment in the extension system has been driven by these twin imperatives. However, there are tensions between the objectives of stimulating agricultural growth, on the one hand, and extensively penetrating society and winning elections, on the other, and these may reduce the returns to this investment. Implications are drawn for wider debates on the reform of agricultural extension.*

**Key words:** Extension services, Ethiopia, politics, control, input markets

## 1 Introduction

Over the past 20 years, when many African governments have shown limited commitment to supporting smallholder agriculture and when many have neglected agricultural extension services in particular, the Government of Ethiopia has consistently invested in both. Fan et al. (2009) report that, on average, the share of national budget devoted to agriculture expenditure in sub-Saharan Africa fell from 5.5% in 1990 to 3.8% in 2000. There was a recovery over the next five years, linked to the commitment made by African Heads of State in Maputo in July 2003 to ‘adopt sound policies for agricultural and rural development, and commit ourselves to allocating at least 10% of national budgetary resources for their implementation within five years’ (Assembly of the African Union, 2003). Nevertheless, data accessed by Fan et al. (2009) suggest that Ethiopia was one of only eight countries to meet that target. Official figures supplied by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development show that, over the decade 2002/3-2011/12, agriculture was allocated an average of 15% of the government development budget.

Investment in the provision of agricultural extension services has been an important and high-profile feature of this general investment in the agricultural sector. As will be

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\*Respectively, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Addis Ababa University; and Reader, Centre for Development, Environment and Policy, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (cp31@soas.ac.uk). This article is an output of the DFID-funded Future Agricultures Consortium ([www.future-agricultures.org/peapa](http://www.future-agricultures.org/peapa)). However, the views presented do not represent the views of DFID. The authors wish to thank Amdissa Teshome, Ian Scoones and Professor Tegegne Gebreegziher for comments on an earlier version of this article. Any errors and omissions are, however, their own.

discussed in more detail below, an ambitious training programme for extension workers has enabled the number of such workers in the country to increase from 2,500 in 1995 to 15,000 in 2002 (Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2006) and to over 45,000 in 2009 (Davis et al., 2010). The objective is to employ three extension workers (now known as ‘development agents’) soon in every *kebele* (ward) in the country, with additional agents working across *kebeles*. The three agents per *kebele* specialise in crop production, livestock production and natural-resources management respectively, whilst those responsible for animal health work across a cluster of *kebeles*.

Davis et al. (2010: 52) comment that ‘the degree of growth [in the Ethiopian extension system] since 2002, both in personnel and in infrastructure, is unlike any other extension system in the world’, and calculate that, once the system is fully staffed, the farmer: extension worker ratio will be amongst the lowest in the world, lower even than that of China. Figures for the total number of extension staff in Africa are uncertain, but a widely cited estimate (see, for example Sachs et al., 2004; Davis, 2008) from the Sasakawa Africa Association, dated around 2000, is 150,000. At that time there were about 15,000 extension workers in Ethiopia. Currently, therefore, Ethiopia could account for anything up to 25% of all the extension workers in sub-Saharan Africa and this figure could rise to 30% when the targeted staffing – equating to 60-66,000 workers in post – is achieved.

In this article we seek to explain the political drivers for this commitment to public investment in smallholder agriculture and, in particular, to investment in agricultural extension, noting the divergence from African norms. We argue that broad-based agricultural growth is perceived as essential to the long-term survival of the current Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government and that agricultural extension is perceived as essential to raising the productivity of smallholder agriculture. However, we also argue that investment in agricultural extension has a second objective, to contribute to the securing of political control across Ethiopia’s large and diverse countryside. Whilst reinforcing the government’s commitment to investment in extension, the constraints imposed by this second objective also impede the efficiency of the extension system, thereby reducing its effectiveness in achieving the first goal of broad-based agricultural growth.

## 2 Ethiopian context

Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa. It is also a highly diverse nation, both ethnically – home to over 70 ethnic groups – and agro-ecologically – encompassing highlands, lowland and even desert. The country’s population is concentrated in the highlands, whereas the lowlands are sparsely populated, due to the prevalence of malaria and other vector-borne diseases as well as for other geographical, historical and socio-economic reasons. According to Teller et al. (2007), nearly 80% of the population live in only 37% of the total landmass, while the remaining 20% inhabit 63% of the total land area.

Ethiopia also remains a highly agrarian nation. In 2010 the urbanisation rate was only around 17% (CIA World Factbook, 2012), whilst agriculture contributed over 40% of GDP and employment and over 80% of export earnings (Ethiopian Economics Association, 2011: 30–2). In the highlands, mixed farming (grain and livestock) is prevalent, whereas in the peripheral lowland regions pastoral production is the major source of livelihood. Coffee-growing regions are located in the south-western and south-eastern highlands, while

large plantations specialising in cotton, sugarcane and sisal production are located along the river basins of the Rift Valley and the north-western lowlands. The western lowlands are covered by forests and other types of natural vegetation where planned resettlement of food-deficit populations has taken place both in the past and at present.

Poverty levels are high in Ethiopia, which was ranked 174th out of 187 in terms of the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2011), and many within the population remain dependent on some kind of food aid. According to WFP/FAO (2012), 3.2 million people required relief food assistance in the first half of 2012, a declining figure following the country's eighth consecutive good main-rains harvest. However, it was projected that a total of around 13 million beneficiaries would receive food assistance in one way or another once programmes such as the large national Productive Safety Net Programme were taken into account.

At the same time, in recent years the Ethiopian economy has become one of the fastest growing in the world. While much debated, it is claimed that the country has registered a double-digit economic growth rate over the period 2005/6-2009/10, having grown at just over 6% per annum over the period 2000/1-2004/5 (Ethiopian Economics Association, 2011: 6-7).

### 3 Political context

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in Ethiopia in 1991 following a decade and a half of armed struggle that eventually overthrew the military regime of President Mengistu. At that time the EPRDF was a coalition of four ethnically-based resistance groups, spearheaded by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The EPRDF managed to build a robust constituency of support in the rural areas of north and central Ethiopia by rallying behind its broad sections of farming communities that were antagonised by the oppressive policies and attendant practices of the military regime. It also allied with the neighbouring Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which provided it with military and logistical support in exchange for a promise of Eritrean secession from Ethiopia once Mengistu was overthrown. Eritrea did indeed secede *de facto* in 1991, and *de jure* following a referendum in 1993. This development was widely unpopular within Ethiopia, both for reasons of national pride and because Eritrean independence deprived Ethiopia of access to sea ports, i.e. the country was now landlocked. In 1998-2000 a conflict erupted between the two countries over borders and various economic issues, leading to an enduring rift within both the TPLF and EPRDF over how aggressively to prosecute the conflict. Prime Minister Meles hung on as Chairman of the TPLF and head of the EPRDF government, but not without a fight.

In power the EPRDF remains an alliance of four parties and also works closely with five other regional parties, each of which it had a hand in creating. In 1995 it promulgated a new Constitution, which established a federal state based on ethno-linguistically constituted regional governments (plus sub-regional administrations) and recognising ethnic rights to self-determination. These provisions notwithstanding, it has sought to control all branches of government from the centre, with its member organisations serving as agents of centralised power under the facade of decentralisation-cum-devolution.

Since then, the EPRDF has fought four sets of national and regional parliamentary elections. The 1995 elections were boycotted by opposition parties. In 2000 the country

was at war and, whilst the opposition gained some seats in the legislature, there was high popular support for the EPRDF on the back of its victory in western Eritrea. In 2005 the opposition made major gains, especially in Addis Ababa and other urban centres, but more than 200 opposition leaders were then imprisoned after refusing to take their seats, claiming that the opposition had won an overall victory. Most recently, in 2010 the EPRDF and its allied parties won 99.6% of federal and regional parliamentary seats.

The 2010 election result provides evidence of the degree of political control established by the EPRDF. Since 2005, it has also sought to control the policy-advocacy activities of non-governmental organisations through a mandatory re-registration process. Nevertheless, since 1991 the EPRDF has faced – and continues to face – multiple threats, both within and outside the country, which have contributed to its ‘deep-seated political insecurity’ (Abegaz, 2011: 15, 30, 36) and driven its policy-making. The TPLF home base of Tigray accounts for only 5% of the Ethiopian population and its support is not unchallenged even there, not least because of the split over Eritrea. Other EPRDF parties and allies also face local opposition. Additional threats to EPRDF rule include:

- threats from armed separatist groups, like the Ogaden National Liberation Front (which fell out with the EPRDF in 1998) in the Somali region and the Oromo Liberation Front in the Oromia region;
- continued antagonism from Eritrea, which hosts separatist and unionist movements of various persuasions striving to effect regime change in Ethiopia; and
- the fact that the EPRDF’s close co-operation with the West in the fight against political Islam in the sub-region has brought it into conflict with radical Islamist movements engaged in terrorist activities, for example in neighbouring Somalia. Tight political control throughout the country may be seen as a means of ensuring that such groups do not establish a foothold inside Ethiopia.

#### **4 The political significance of agriculture**

The EPRDF understands well the political significance of agriculture within Ethiopia. In part, it was neglect of the sector that led to the downfall of the two previous regimes (the second time at the hands of the EPRDF), as disaffected rural areas became safe havens for insurgent groups looking to overthrow the regime. Keeley and Scoones (2000) note the specific significance of famine, with crises in 1973/4, 1984/5 and 1991 closely linked to the downfall of regimes. Thus, from the outset, the EPRDF demonstrated a high commitment to achieving food security, with the Prime Minister in particular investing substantial political capital in promising to ‘cross the divide’ to food self-sufficiency. From the mid-1990s the ‘guiding economic development strategy’ in the country has been one of Agricultural Development-Led Industrialisation or ADLI (Ethiopian Economics Association, 2011: 27).

More generally, as a regime with a relatively narrow core support base, the EPRDF has pursued rapid and broad-based growth to achieve legitimacy (Abegaz, 2011). Given the agrarian nature of the society and economy, this has led naturally to a strong emphasis on smallholder agriculture. As clearly stipulated in its organisational strategy document entitled ‘Development, Democracy and Revolutionary Democracy’, the EPRDF (2006)

recognises these dynamics:<sup>1</sup> the party's overarching policy approach is taken from East Asian nations such as Taiwan and South Korea, which pursued broad-based growth in large part because they faced external Communist threats with significant potential internal support (see also Campos and Root, 1996).<sup>2</sup>

Investment in agricultural extension is thus formally pursued as a means to stimulating smallholder agricultural productivity, thereby generating broad-based agricultural growth and reducing poverty. Using household survey data from 1994 to 2004 that are broadly representative of the main cropping zones of the country (but not pastoralist areas), Dercon et al. (2008) provide evidence that extension investment has indeed achieved some impact. They calculate that, other things being equal, households that had contact with extension officers – measured as receiving at least one extension visit in the period prior to a survey – were 9.8 percentage points less likely to be poor than households that did not. Similarly, receiving at least one extension visit was associated with a 7.1% increase in consumption growth. On the other hand, various studies have also documented inefficiencies in extension provision, which would tend to reduce the impact of extension investment. Some of these are discussed in more detail below.

## 5 History of extension policy prior to the EPRDF

Agricultural extension has been at the centre of policies pertaining to the sector during the reigns of successive Ethiopian governments (Gebremedhin et al., 2006). Government-led agricultural extension services began in the 1950s when the Alemaya College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts (currently University of Haramaya), that had links with

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1. EPRDF (2006) recognises globalisation as a major hallmark of the contemporary world order, underpinned by unprecedented capital mobility, transport and communications revolutions, continuous technological change and unfettered competition, calling for all-round capacity and effectiveness to ensure economic survival. Hence, it views rent-seeking behaviour in various domains (natural resources, transactions in goods and services, policy, agricultural engagement, foreign aid, etc.) as the major threat to development efforts. In view of this, it underlines the need for a 'democratic developmental state' that accords primacy to the role of a government committed to spearheading development and waging relentless struggles against rent-seeking and speculative practices wherever these maladies are found.
  2. The analysis in this paragraph, whilst persuasive historically, is potentially challenged by the recent phenomenon of large-scale land deals in Ethiopia (Rahmato, 2011; Anseeuw et al., 2012). The government insists that this is complementary to efforts to increase the productivity of smallholder agriculture and not a substitute for it. However, the scale of future land deals envisaged in the government's 2010-15 Growth and Transformation Plan suggests, at the very least, that smallholder agriculture is no longer seen as the basis for wider economic growth. At local level Rahmato (2011) observes that such land allocations may well damage more existing livelihoods than they create new jobs. This raises two possibilities. First, that the federal government genuinely believes that the land is virtually 'unutilised' and that allocations to large-scale investors are effectively costless. The weak feedback mechanisms within Ethiopia's top-down bureaucracy could plausibly mean that important local knowledge to the contrary is not fed back to the top. If so, when the reality on the ground is realised, the government can be expected to scale back the number and size of future allocations. Secondly, and more scarily, the government does know the local cost of such deals, but now – especially after the extension of state institutions throughout the country and the resounding 2010 election victory – feels secure enough to pursue a growth strategy that imposes costs on 'peripheral' regions of the country whilst generating benefits (macroeconomic growth, foreign exchange, lower urban food prices, limited additional tax revenue) primarily for the centre. As Prime Minister Meles told the 2012 World Economic Forum meeting: 'The going is going to get tough so Ethiopia needs a tough leader, a leader prepared to say no. You can't please everyone' (Dowden, 2012).

Oklahoma State University in the United States, was entrusted with the task of reaching out to farming communities by providing extension services and disseminating research-based knowledge and adult education (Davis et al., 2010). When the Ministry of Agriculture of the imperial government was established in 1963, it was given the mandate for providing extension services, as a result of which it established departments responsible for agricultural extension at both the Ministry and its branch offices (Habtemariam, 2007).

Between the late 1950s and 1960s, the imperial government developed three successive Five-Year National Development Plans (1957-62, 1962-7, 1968-73). The first two favoured large-scale farms specialising in the production of export crops, whereas the third (1968-73) recognised the need for transforming smallholder production by focusing on localities with high production potential (Aredo, 1990: 50). This move culminated in the establishment of the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU) and the Wolaita Agricultural Development Unit (WADU), among others, in today's Oromia and Southern Regional States respectively (Ketsela, 2006a). These were set up to facilitate the provision of technological packages in the form of improved seeds, fertiliser and credit, and to assist in building human and physical infrastructure development and soil conservation (Ketsela, 2006b). Agricultural extension was classified into what came to be known as the Comprehensive Package Approach (CPA) and the Minimum Package Approach (MPA), both of which were donor-supported and targeted wealthy smallholders and those engaged in commercial agriculture (Gebremedhin et al., 2006). The CPA was implemented by organising groups of farmers who were targeted to benefit from research-based knowledge and the application of improved inputs, whilst the MPA was designed to address similar goals for individual farming households (Davis et al., 2010). Progress in increasing production through these package approaches under imperial rule was bedevilled by structural constraints such as the land-tenure system, which was characterised by a high incidence of tenancy and discouraged tenants from investing in land. However, through their representatives in the political organs of the imperial establishment, the landlords in the different parts of the country blocked attempts at reforming the tenure system.<sup>3</sup>

Under military rule (1974-91), implementation of the Minimum Package Approach initially became the focus of agricultural extension with support from the World Bank, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (SIDA). This approach later assumed a new nomenclature, the Peasant Agricultural Development Extension Program (PADEP), which was also supported by foreign donors. Nevertheless, agricultural policy in the immediate aftermath of the demise of imperial rule focused more on implementing the Land Reform Proclamation<sup>4</sup> than on promoting agricultural extension (Davis et al., 2010). Moreover, given the limited number of extension workers and lack of financial and other forms of incentives, PADEP failed in terms of achieving its stated objectives (Degefe and Nega, 2000). Instead, agricultural development priorities anchored in the ideological orientation of the military government, that accorded primacy to co-operatives and state farms, led to a

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3. Interview with a former member of the Management of the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU), 28 April 2011, Washington, DC.

4. The *Land Reform Act* (PMAC, 1975) terminated private ownership of rural land, rendering it public property under the custody of the state (art. 3, sub-art. 1 and 2), prohibited transfer of land through sale, lease or mortgage (art. 5), abolished tenancy (art. 4, sub-art. 5), and freed all tenants from all types of obligation to landlords (art. 6, sub-art. 3).

situation in which individual peasant producers were largely deprived of access to credit services and improved inputs. Hence efforts made during the reigns of both the imperial and military regimes in expediting agricultural development proved futile (Tilahun, 1999).

## 6 Extension policy under the EPRDF

Under the EPRDF, smallholders became the focus of interventions in agriculture in general and in regard to agricultural extension in particular. This won the regime initial support from smallholders who hoped to get preferential access to agricultural inputs and other related services. The first four years of EPRDF rule (1991-5) were marked by the resumption of PADEP. At the same time, a pilot extension system supported by Sasakawa Global 2000 (SG-2000) was introduced in 1993, involving 160 farmers in demonstration exercises focusing on maize and wheat production. The number of participating farmers grew tenfold by 1994 with the establishment of additional demonstration sites engaged in sorghum and teff production (Gebremedhin et al., 2006), and was scaled up even more rapidly in 1995. The success of the SG-2000 scheme and a boom harvest in 1995 prompted the government to adopt agricultural extension as a major component of ADLI.<sup>5</sup>

Based on this, a new extension programme, the Participatory Demonstration and Training Extension System (PADETES), was introduced. During the launching of PADETES, the government announced that its objective was to enhance the productivity, production capacity and empowerment of smallholders with a view to ensuring prospects for national food self-sufficiency, increasing the volume and variety of industrial raw materials (primary products), and producing for the export market (Ethiopian Economics Association, 2004/5). Under the PADETES scheme, one extension team was deployed for each of the country's three main agricultural production zones, namely, those with abundant moisture, moisture-deficit areas, and the pastoral rangelands. The number of smallholder farmers participating in the scheme increased from 32,000 in 1995 to about 4.2 million in 2002, implying that about one-third of all farmers participated in PADETES. Given the increase in the number of extension workers deployed (noted earlier), the development agent to farmer ratio also improved from 1:5000 to 1:800.

In 2004 the government embarked on a further ambitious expansion of the extension system in the country. Central to this was the establishment of Agricultural Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges (ATVETs) to train a new cadre of extension workers, and of farmer training centres (FTCs) to become the focal point of extension support in every *kebele* in the country. During this period, the annual public investment in the extension programme amounted to over US\$50 million or almost 2% of agricultural GDP and by 2007-8 the number of farmers reached is thought to have been around 9 million (Spielman et al., 2010).

As the introduction first of PADETES and then of FTCs illustrates, agricultural extension policy has evolved over time in an effort to improve the returns to the substantial public investment made in the system. According to Rahmato (2008), whereas the initial

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5. According to Keeley and Scoones (2000), the discourse on the positive ramifications of agricultural extension in Ethiopia was spearheaded by the bureaucratic elite and the agricultural research institutes that are engaged in facilitating increased production and productivity under the aegis of the federal and regional governments. However, the decision to scale up the successes of the SG-2000 scheme was a political one taken by the Prime Minister.

focus was on food crops and the recommendations were tailored principally to higher-potential areas, in more recent years extension packages have been developed to suit different agro-ecological zones including the dry-land areas. These include packages for high-value crops (spices, oilseeds, vegetables), livestock (dairy, poultry, beekeeping, fattening), and natural resources (forestry and soil and water conservation). Further evidence that the top echelons of government realise that the effectiveness and efficiency of the system could be further improved comes from the invitation extended by the government to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2009 to undertake a review of the extension system in the country (available as Davis et al., 2010).

However, as discussed below, there have been definite limits to what the government is willing to countenance in order to improve system efficiency. Specifically, greater involvement of the private sector, especially international firms, in the provision of key inputs for staple food crops and of extension advice to farmers has not been embraced. Thus, whilst dialogue with some international development partners focuses on this issue, at the time of writing the government is preparing to extend a communications and mobilisation approach known as 1:5 – again borrowed from East Asia and already piloted in some health campaigns, amongst others – into the agricultural extension sphere.<sup>6</sup>

## 7 Donors, extension policy and input market liberalisation

As noted above, there has been support for investment in extension from multilateral, bilateral and other donors throughout the EPRDF period. Prominent amongst these have been the World Bank, SG-2000 and IFAD. However, perhaps uniquely amongst African governments, the Ethiopian government has also invested heavily from its own resources in extension. Moreover, donors' financial support has never allowed them to dictate the terms of extension policy to the EPRDF government. Thus, Keeley and Scoones (2000: 100) cite an official in a bilateral donor agency as saying that, following the decision to upscale the SG-2000 pilot scheme in the late 1990s, extension policy is 'the one policy we can't do anything about'.

The best example of this concerns debates over the role of the private sector in the provision of services that are complementary to extension advice, for example, seed and fertiliser supply. During the 1990s, when the government was still heavily dependent on donor financial assistance after the economic difficulties of the Mengistu regime, a number of donors encouraged it to allow a greater role for the private sector in agricultural input markets. Keeley and Scoones (2000) report the inaugural meeting, in 1997, of a so-called Agribusiness Forum that brought together donors (including the World Bank, SG-2000 and USAID), government ministers, multinational companies and domestic private operators to deliberate on the issue of involving the private sector in agriculture in partnership with the government. The meeting was co-hosted by the Prime Minister and SG-2000 and was chaired by former US President Jimmy Carter. However, in the five years following this meeting, the position of the Ethiopian government seems to have hardened against the free

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6. This is essentially a pyramid scheme that can function equally within government and party structures (in practice the two are deeply intertwined) and rapidly extend to the wider population. Thus, one person (who could be a national, regional, zonal or ward figure) passes a message to five others within an informal group, who each in turn pass it down to five more, until it has been widely disseminated.



entry (even appropriately regulated) of the commercial private sector. This position has not changed over the past decade.

The first liberalisation reforms were actually introduced in 1992-3, when the monopoly over the fertiliser market exercised by the state-owned Agricultural Input Supply Enterprise was ended (Ketsela, 2006b). However, 'liberalisation' was only ever partial, given that four out of the six companies involved in the sale and distribution of fertilisers were newly created holding companies with strong ties to regional governments (Degefe and Nega, 2000; Abiyo, 2001). At a later stage, the two non-EPRDF private companies were pushed out under duress, thereby enabling the ruling party's firms to monopolise the fertiliser market (Abegaz, 2011: 52). Jayne et al. (2003: 300) noted that the holding companies received 'preferential treatment in the allocation of foreign exchange for importation and in the distribution of fertiliser through government-administered credit to farmers', and later that the respective regional governments gave them monopolies over the distribution of fertiliser in their regions.

A similar situation of government control despite formal liberalisation is also observed in relation to the production, sale and distribution of improved seeds that are one of the major focuses of the agricultural extension programme (Degefe and Nega, 2000; Ketsela, 2006b; Alemu, 2010). Alemu (2010: 14) notes that the involvement of multinational firms in the seed sector is discouraged by prohibition of the repatriation of foreign exchange, whilst domestic firms are constrained to depend on public sector suppliers of source seed, to comply with set prices and 'to align to the public distribution system'. Indeed, the story that Alemu tells in relation to Ethiopian seed policy – of policy and institutional evolution in search of greater effectiveness and efficiency, but with clear limits to the role that can be countenanced for the private sector – is very similar to the one that is told here for extension policy.

In view of the fact that the majority of smallholder farmers cannot pay cash for improved inputs, the policy of the EPRDF government has been to extend credit to producers to facilitate the adoption of new technologies as recommended by the extension programme. In order to access agricultural credit, farmers have to be organised in formally recognised co-operatives or to form credit and saving groups under the guidance of extension workers. After receiving inputs on credit, each beneficiary of the service is required to repay his/her share of the debt during each harvest season through the respective co-operative/group leaders assisted by extension workers and grassroots (*kebele*) administrations (Ketsela, 2006b). Officially, this mechanism of organising producers was designed to provide a collateral substitute for ensuring repayment of credit. Indeed, defaulting smallholders are sometimes forced to sell their oxen and other assets to settle their debts (Fantahn and Minuye, 2000: 26). However, as noted below, channelling credit through co-operatives or other groups established by extension staff also enables credit and the associated inputs to become instruments of patronage. There are also allegations that it is farmers who are suspected of sympathising with the opposition who are singled out for asset sales to cover loan defaults.

Finally, international discourse on pluralistic extension systems envisages a role for NGO providers of extension advice alongside government and commercial private sources. In Ethiopia NGOs do indeed engage in extension projects in particular localities and may pilot methodologies that can later be adopted in other areas. However, in all cases NGOs are expected to work closely with local state extension staff.

Of course, the Ethiopian government's insistence on the dominance of state (and/or party – Abegaz, 2011) enterprises in strategic markets could be driven primarily by ideology. As a 'vanguard' party historically rooted in Marxism-Leninism, the EPRDF undoubtedly has an ideological commitment to strong state-party leadership of the development process. However, the government has been willing to be pragmatic in other areas, most notably in its recent embracing of transnational and local large-scale investment in land.<sup>7</sup> The fact that, despite its recognition of the limitation of its extension model, the government has shown almost no flexibility in this area of private-sector involvement suggests that there are additional considerations when it comes to private-sector participation in support services for staple food crops.

## 8 Extension as an instrument of political control

The story so far, therefore, is of significant and sustained investment by the Ethiopian government in agricultural extension provision, formally as a means to stimulating broad-based agricultural growth – and with some evidence of impact in this regard. Agricultural extension policy has also evolved over time in an effort to improve the returns to the substantial public investment made in the system. However, whilst donors have supported the government's extension programme, their financial support has never allowed them to dictate the terms of extension policy, and, in particular, the government has steadfastly resisted donor calls for greater liberalisation of input markets or for more pluralistic extension models in general. Instead, seed and fertiliser supply and credit have been closely tied to extension provision and all have remained tightly controlled by state agencies and/or stated-owned companies. In this Section we explain these features of the Ethiopian extension system in terms of a second (and not publicly stated) objective, namely to establish the control of the 'insecure' (Abegaz, 2011) EPRDF government throughout the large and diverse country. Our case for this second, unstated objective proceeds in five stages.

First, in an interview with Richard Dowden in May 2012, Prime Minister Meles spoke with pride of how the Ethiopian state had now penetrated into every village in the country: 'Our writ runs in every village. That never happened in the history of Ethiopia. The state was distant, irrelevant' (Dowden, 2012). Rahmato (2009) reaches a similar conclusion. He states that the military government extended the control of the state far more than its predecessor,<sup>8</sup> but that the intrusive power of the state under the EPRDF has surpassed even that of the military government for several reasons, including replacement of grassroots administrations and associated structures by cabinets, councils, and administrative managers, the deployment of party functionaries and cells in every village and neighbourhood, and the considerable increase in the number of development agents

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7. In May 2012 Prime Minister Meles told Richard Dowden, 'The criticism we had in the past was that we were crazy Marxists. Now we are accused of selling the family spoons to foreigners. It's a balance.' (Dowden, 2012).

8. Keeley and Scoones (2000: 94–5) note that 'Ethiopia has always been dominated by the Abyssinian north. Southern regions have never been politically dominant, and indeed were largely only incorporated into the Ethiopian state at the same time as the European "scramble for Africa". With the exception of several small kingdoms, the south does not have the long traditions of state organisation of the Abyssinian north. As part of Ethiopia, these areas have consistently lacked resources and administrative capacity.'

deployed. The presence of extension workers in every rural community, working in tandem with farmers graduating from FTCs, and grassroots administrative and party structures spread over villages and neighbourhoods of rural Ethiopia, make scrutiny and control of activities down to the household level increasingly complete.

Secondly, as is clear from Rahmato's argument, the context in which extension workers operate is not politically neutral. In Ethiopia state and (ruling) party structures are deeply intertwined. Therefore, in extending the control of the state across Ethiopia, the EPRDF has also been extending its own control. Thus, in every *kebele* in the country, there are three structures: the elected *kebele* Council, the *kebele* Cabinet and the EPRDF *kebele* Committee. The Cabinet is the state administration at *kebele* level, dealing with development planning, mobilisation, service provision and security. It is formally accountable to the Council, which approves membership of the Cabinet, as well as to the Cabinet at *woreda* (district) level. In practice, the Council mainly hears reports from the Cabinet, i.e. it exercises little control over it (Yilmaz and Venugopal, 2008). Each *kebele* Cabinet consists of the following officers: the Chief Administrator and his/her deputy, the *kebele* manager (who is also the Cabinet secretary), the Speaker of the Council, the School Director, the Health Officer and the Development Agent (i.e. extension worker). Of the three development agents in a *kebele*, one is formally approved by the Council to serve in the Cabinet. Most often, though not always, this is the person in charge of crop production. The selection of the health worker, from the two posted in each *kebele*, is generally made on the basis of training and years of service, i.e. seniority.<sup>9</sup>

There is usually some overlap in personnel between the Cabinet and the EPRDF *kebele* Committee, with the Chief Administrator of the Cabinet typically also being a member of the party Committee. Furthermore, the Speaker of the Council and School Director are appointed by the *kebele* Council from amongst its members. As noted above, in the 2010 elections almost all elected officials in Ethiopia at all levels, including local and grassroots units, were EPRDF candidates, so the overwhelming majority of these officers are EPRDF members. Thus, if the extension worker and health officer who are chosen to be in the Cabinet are politically neutral, they are the only members of the Cabinet who are. They are undoubtedly involved in decision-making where party interests are considered.

Thirdly, extension workers are themselves widely held to be selected for their political loyalty. To become an extension worker, a person first has to be trained at an ATVET. Admission to these training institutes is formally based on grades obtained in the national entrance examinations prepared by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, for which eligible applicants are required to complete 10th grade in the regular high schools. Selecting qualified candidates is undertaken by regional government officials on the basis of quotas. However, due to shortage of space and limited quotas, not all applicants who meet the requirements for admission can join an ATVET. Formally, therefore, preferential treatment is given through affirmative action on the basis of gender and residence in the peripheral regions. However, in interviews conducted by the lead author for this article,<sup>10</sup> it was learned that in practice additional criteria like political allegiance and loyalty are applied to discriminate among those short-listed. Informants added that subjective considerations like commitment to ensuring the success of the agricultural extension programme are often used

9. Interview with *woreda* Agricultural Officer in the Southern Regional State, 7 August 2013.

10. Interviews with an ex-director and instructors of ATVETs, conducted in Addis Ababa, December 2010.

for selecting candidates. The additional points, ranging between 15% and 25% of the total weighted average, that members and sympathisers of the EPRDF receive on this basis enable them to enjoy comparative advantages over other competitors. Those who undertake the screening are believed to be members of the ruling party, operating on the basis of standing instructions to this effect, and they are made aware of who among the candidates are or are not members of the ruling party through various means.

Once trained, aspiring extension workers again find themselves in a situation of excess supply. Thus, Davis et al. (2010) report that, by the end of 2008, ATVETs had trained 62,764 potential extension workers to diploma level, but that only 45,812 were employed because of resource constraints. Of course, some find other employment, either instead of or after taking up a job as an extension worker. According to our various informants, perhaps 10% of ATVET graduates have secured employment in other organisations after serving as extension agents for a number of years. Many now serve in local, zonal, regional, and federal government organisations as administrators, sector office heads, legislators, and experts. However, it is again possible that excess supply of trained extension workers allows considerations of political loyalty to be undertaken in their final selection. Yilmaz and Venugopal (2008: 7) claim that ‘all local government employees are beholden to the party administration’.

Fourthly, there are various allegations that, in their allocation of seeds, fertilisers and credit, extension workers give priority to farmers loyal to the EPRDF.<sup>11</sup> For example, Ketsela (2006a: 166) argues that access to agricultural inputs has become an instrument of political control and patronage. Similarly, journalist Dessalegn (2012: 210) cites his December 2011 article in *Feteh* (an Amharic weekly), a portion of which can be translated from the Amharic as follows:

EPRDF's quest for effecting unbridled control by securing electoral support from voters, among which smallholder farmers stand out as a significant majority, was expedited through recourse to various measures ranging from crude threat to entitlement in the form of incentives like favorable access to credits/financial services, fertilisers and other agricultural inputs, and productive land. In this manner, political loyalty got precedence over legitimate entitlements accruing from citizenship rights.

Abegaz (2011: 48) cites World Bank concerns that microfinance loans are used in a similar manner, whilst Gudina (2003: 187) alleges that even food-aid distribution has been manipulated in this way in the Oromo region: ‘Like the supply of fertilisers, food aid to the needy has been politicised and there are alarming reports in the independent press that peasants known to have supported or voted for the opposition have become targets of the angry government cadres who are obstructing external food aid to the hungry.’

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11. In this regard, the role of development agent diverges from that of health worker. All health workers are female, as one of their major responsibilities is maternal and child health, to which, according to Lemma and Matji (2013), their deployment since 2003 has made an important contribution. Whilst health workers work in the same politicised environment as agricultural development agents, the exercise of discrimination over the access to health services for mothers, children, the aged, poor or disabled would constitute a cultural taboo and be politically counterproductive.

Fifthly, extension workers are widely reported to engage in non-extension activities, such as administration, tax collection, and popularisation of government policies including those that are not directly related to agriculture (Gebremedhin et al., 2006). Indeed, their official designation as Development Agents provides a clue to this wider role. However, this can also spill over into campaigning on behalf of the EPRDF. Thus, a study by Kelemework and Kassa (2006: 22) on the state of agricultural extension service in Ethiopia found that about 87% and 46% of the extension workers interviewed stated that they were involved in credit-repayment processes and tax collection respectively, and some admitted that ‘in some cases they play an advocacy role in the interest of the ruling party’.

At election time, this may mean involvement not just in mobilising, but also in influencing, voters. For example, in the 2005 election, opposition parties campaigning in Ambo district (Oromia Region) lodged complaints with the election authorities that Development Agents and other civil servants were promoting local development projects as achievements of the EPRDF administration, rubbishing opposition parties and trying to scare voters into believing that their ballot paper was not secret after all. However, no action was taken in response to these complaints (Merera Gudina, personal communication, 30 May 2012). Even if it is not official policy for extension workers to do this, in the highly politicised context in which they operate, it is not surprising if ‘zealous’ individuals do indeed use their formal position for political ends.

## 9 Trade-offs in agricultural extension policy-making

This article has argued that Ethiopia’s major investment in agricultural extension under the EPRDF government has been driven by twin objectives. The formal objective has been to enhance the productivity and production capacity of smallholder farmers so as to stimulate broad-based growth. The unstated objective has been to extend the political control of the EPRDF throughout the country, including mobilising support around election time. Furthermore, it has argued that both these objectives can be traced to the same source: the insecurity of the EPRDF in governing a large and diverse country, given its narrow ‘core’ support base and the range of threats, both internal and external, that it has faced to its hold on power. In this context, as in East Asia fifty years ago (Campos and Root, 1996; EPRDF, 2006), broad-based growth is seen as essential to achieve legitimacy for the government, as retaining power by force alone is likely to be unsustainable.

Dercon et al. (2008) provide evidence that extension investment has indeed achieved some impact on growth and poverty reduction in the country. However, the extension literature also indicates that there are significant inefficiencies in the operation of the national extension system. Our analysis suggests that these are linked to trade-offs between the twin objectives of extension policy in the country.

Davis et al. (2010) and Spielman et al. (2010) both cite the roots of inefficiency as being in the top-down, centralised control of the extension system that belies the formally decentralised structures in place. It is widely accepted that effective extension services should be responsive to the diversity of farmers’ needs and local conditions, empowering farmers to thrive in varying circumstances. A top-down approach is poorly suited to this, unless perhaps there is a great technological package and homogeneous agro-ecological conditions, which is certainly not the case across Ethiopia. Thus Spielman et al. (2010: 190) write:

The hierarchical ‘culture’ underlying the extension system does little to encourage and exploit the inherent resourcefulness of those who work closely with farmers and rural communities ... And although extension has been decentralised to the administrative control of regional governments and *woreda* administrations, continued imposition of targets from above and weak local capacity have not yet permitted the emergence of a dynamic demand-driven system.

It is hard, however, to create the conditions for ‘a dynamic demand-driven system’ when extension workers are also promoting an agenda of political control.

The same authors also note that Ethiopian farmers would benefit from the greater responsiveness and competition that are likely to come from private-sector input suppliers. This could provide them with a greater variety of inputs to experiment with and perhaps additional sources of technical information. However, the control objective appears to dictate tight state control over input markets, enabling extension workers, working together with other government agents, to reward farmers according to their political loyalties, and restricting livelihood options for political opponents.

Thirdly, Davis et al. (2010: 11) briefly note that extension workers’ engagement in non-agricultural activities is a distraction from their core task of assisting farmers to increase agricultural productivity. Extension workers’ involvement in loan repayment (collection) poses a particular challenge, as it can strain relationships with farmers to the detriment of knowledge dissemination and empowerment. Belay (2002 cited in Mengistu, 2009: 30) argued that the involvement of extension workers in non-extension activities led to the undermining of their credibility and reputation, with the result that many people tended to view them as government prolocutors rather than facilitators of agricultural development endeavours. According to Mengistu (2009), their close links to the party-state machinery pose difficulties for their gathering the confidence and co-operation of farming communities who tend to view them as bureaucrats and politicians, perhaps with little concern for the needs and preferences of local people.

There is evidence of strains within Ethiopian agricultural policy despite the government’s significant investment: farmers’ frustrations with poor input supply, reluctance to join co-operatives (Jemma, 2006), damaging food-price inflation in recent years (implying that supply is not keeping pace with rapidly growing demand) and hence continuing dependence on food aid. The government is undoubtedly working hard to stimulate agricultural growth, but can its growth objectives be fully achieved whilst the political-control imperative is also still being pursued?

Justifiably, Ethiopia’s experience also features prominently in wider reviews of extension practice in Africa. As noted at the outset of this article, the commitment of the Ethiopian government to investment in agricultural extension is unparalleled in the continent. However, its hierarchical approach is at odds with the ‘pluralism [that] is the future of extension in SSA, with a greater emphasis on demand-driven, participatory programs’ (Davis, 2008: 108). Reflecting on the political roots of the Ethiopian extension programme, we close with a hypothesis for further research. Pluralistic extension models in other African countries are often either donor-driven or experience default conditions due to neglect of the state service. There are few, if any, examples of strategic leadership by

African governments to establish and co-ordinate pluralistic extension systems. Could it be that some African governments are willing to let donor projects experiment with more demand-driven, participatory extension programmes because they attach little political importance to extension? This would also explain a lack of motivation to scale-up successful pilots. Meanwhile, it is motives of political control that drive governments such as that of Ethiopia to invest heavily in extension, but these are not conducive to the pluralistic and demand-driven, participatory extension programmes that are widely viewed as best practice.

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