

# JANES FORUM

JANES differs from other Japanese academic associations in that some of its members work outside academic institutions. Most of them are engaged in development projects in the Nilo-Ethiopian region. The Main theme of this JANES FORUM is "development." There are different perspectives on development and aids. We present here views by three members invited by JANES for a discussion. First, Dr. Gebre Yntiso presents a local perspective on development. Next, Prof. I. Inukai discusses the relation between science and development from a perspective of development studies. Finally, Mr. H. Shibata raises problems of developmental aids from his own experiences as a very dedicated NGO volunteer.

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## **Organizational Dimension of Development in Ethiopia: The Place of Local Institutions in Development Agenda**

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### **Introduction**

In developing countries like Ethiopia labor is still one of the most important factors of production. This is largely because these countries haven't achieved the sophisticated agricultural technologies to replace human power by machine. In most of these societies almost all types of activities in the course of the cultivation cycle (from clearing fields to harvesting crops) are performed by human labor, perhaps assisted by animal power. Generally speaking, the family labor force, which constitutes the unit of production, is not sufficient to produce the required goods and services for the household. Therefore, most agricultural groups have developed the tradition of supplementing family labor with outside help, through certain arrangements for labor exchange. These organizations are known by such terms as communal labor, exchange labor, indigenous work party, reciprocal labor, festive labor, etc. In this text the concept "local organizations/institutions" is defined as an

indigenous grouping of individuals and/or families on the basis of culturally recognized principles for economic and/or non-economic pursuits.

The objective of this paper is to understand the ideals and functions of local organizations; to disclose the erroneous notions and misunderstandings pertaining to these institutions; and to examine their relevance in development. Much of the writers reflections have come from his fieldwork experiences among the Ari and Gumz peoples of Ethiopia. as an instructor of Rural sociology and cooperatives at Addis Ababa University, he enjoyed the opportunity to organize students' presentations on local organizations. Some data have been used from those experiences as well.

Review of conceptual frameworks reveal the existence of different views regarding the place of indigenous organizations in development (Fleuret 1988:60-61). Some analysts tend to view indigenous institutions as obsolete agents to be replace by modern organizational formats. Others

feel that these organizations would persist not simply because they have not yet been replaced by modern organizations, but because they work better. The Ethiopian experiences will be examined in the light of these two apparently extreme views.

### Types and roles of Local Organizations

Group teamwork range from informal mutual aid between neighbors to more systematic interactions within groups defined on the basis of certain attributes, such as sex, age, kinship ties, religious affiliation, territorial proximity, and some other common interests. It can be stated that every ethnic group in Ethiopia has at least few kinds of temporary and/or permanent production organizations. Groupings such as *mol'a* and *idir* among the Ari; *gezima* in Hadiya society; *melekia* and *lantsia* among the Gumz people; and *debo*, *wonfel*, *idir*, *iqub*, *mahiber* and *senbete* as practiced in many parts of Ethiopia, are only few of the local institutions operating in the country.

Local organization are genuine cooperative associations that provide a variety of functions. As Seibel and Massing (1974:45) doubted, it might be difficult to convince economists and development experts about the existence of efficient pre-modern cooperative associations. In the Ethiopian context they are called up on, among others, for (1) agricultural production (land preparation, weeding, harvesting, threshing, etc.); (2) participation in community activities (building churches, mosques, schools, clinics, public halls, roads, bridges, etc.); (3) maintenance of peace and order (dispute settlement, defense, etc.); and (4) mutual help on various occasions (house construction, wedding party, funeral ceremonies, and other shareable joys/sorrows). Indigenous institutions serve as an expression of solidarity and source of security as members are interdependent on each other. They proved to be effective mechanisms by which

activities, that would otherwise be difficult for individuals/families, are undertaken. In some societies, such as the Gumz, local organizations ensure that no one in the community becomes dangerously deprived or no one becomes overly better off than the rest of the group.

Rural production institution operate as "organized business units" contributing, directly or indirectly, to the national economy at large. Because of ecological constraints and technological limitations Ethiopia farmers have to toil heavily. Even working so hard, as indicated earlier, most peasant families can not produce enough for their household consumption, let alone generating surplus for market, without cooperating with other families. In this regard, local organizations play key role in producing goods for local consumption as well as for domestic and international markets. The overwhelming proportion of domestic foods and export crops are produced by small holder farmers, who operate through their long established local institutions.

In some societies there exist different types of institutions for different purposes, while in others a particular organization might be performing various functions. Among the Ari for instance, *idir* work parties serve as production cooperatives, saving and credit institutions, and funeral associations (Gebre 1994:828). Likewise, *mol'a* functions as production organization, socialization agent, and entertainment center (Ibid:821-827). *Idir* is a permanent organization formed by adults, while *mol'a* is a seasonal labor party of the youth. In both cases participants work on each other's field in rotation. These local institutions involve complex organizational structures and offices, explicit rules and regulations, and various mechanisms of social control. They have been changing and adjusting themselves to new situations. *Idir* involve beer and food party, while

*mol'a* requires no such feast. In Ari there exist also other two forms of organizations known by the names *aldi* and *wod*. The former is small-sized work group formed for less difficult agricultural activities by immediate neighbors. *Wod* refers to a spontaneous grouping recruited by a family that wanted the assistance of others. It involves sponsoring of beer/food party.

Among the Gumz, all capable members of a village should participate in *melekia*, which can be considered as a multipurpose association. It is a corporate group dealing with overall economic, political, social and cultural aspects of the village. Members of the village work on each other's field in rotation. The one for whom work is done would provide his guests with local beer and sometimes food before, during and after the work. The beer party is an important occasion during which villagers discuss about public affairs, settle disputes, and plan for future actions. *Lantsia* is an alternative work organization temporarily formed during times of grain shortage to sponsor the beer party. In this case people work on each other's field in rotation without food and drink services. *Lantsia* can also be organized by some specific groups, such as young age/sex mates, physically weak people, and women to pursue certain activities.

Some of the institutions are based on religion and thus combine religious, economic and social functions in a systematic fashion. *Senbete* and *mahiber* are typical associations of this type among followers of Orthodox Christian. Members of the parish usually participate in these two weekly and monthly religious gatherings that involve sharing food/drink, discussion about public matters, dispute settlement, etc. These institutions also serve as bases for establishing more stable economic cooperation among members. The *gezima* labor parties of Hadiya society play constructive roles in agricultural production and

maintaining social solidarity. The Gurage have local institutions called *idir*, which are organized mainly for funeral proceedings and mutual help in times of disaster.

Most societies have widely accepted culturally recognized provisions for granting and/or denying membership; settling disputes; enforcing organizational rules; etc. The rules and regulations of the various institutions are perceived as part of the larger culture governing behavior, consequently, failure to observe them is considered as a violation of the larger culture than the codes of a particular institution per se. In Ari there were numerous incidence in which members of producers cooperatives and peasant associations cheated their officials by being late, absent, or other forms of misbehavior. Among the Gumz, peasant associations and service cooperatives existed only by name. In both societies, however, people remained loyal to their local institutions. From this it becomes apparent that long established tradition, commonly shared sentiments, and emotional commitments are basis for continuity and efficiency of local organization.

#### **Local Organizations Overlooked: policy bias**

Review of official documents of previous Ethiopian governments indicate that no policy commitment existed as regards the promotion and development of local organizations. Instead, all possible attempts had been made to abrogate such institutions in favor new organizational models. In 1960, a decree was issued to provide for the creation of Farm Workers Cooperatives. The preamble states that steps had been taken to accelerate the development of the country's economy through the contributions cooperative enterprises could make. The program virtually failed because only six co-operatives were formed throughout the country in five years time. In 1966

another official statement was passed that aimed at the establishment of co-operatives that again failed for the same reason.

In 1974, Ethiopia's agrarian stagnation and blocked development combined with Eritrean problem, drought, urban unrest, and military pay mutinies resulted in overthrow of the imperial government and its replacement by a military regime. It was a revolutionary transition that gave a dead blow to the age-old feudal system in the country. Among other measures, the government nationalized all rural lands and Peasant Associations were formed to facilitate the implementation of the land reform. Gradually, however, the government wanted to transform Peasant Associations into socialist forms of co-operatives. To this end, a proclamation was issued and part of the provision reads "... it is necessary to organize and develop cooperatives in all places and at all levels in order to lay down the foundation for socialist agriculture so that the peasantry may benefit from joint labor."

Accordingly, several producers and service cooperatives were imposed on people against their interest throughout the country. On the other hand, indigenous institutions were labelled backward and people resorting to them were condemned and/or dealt with seriously. For instance, in Ari leaders of *mol'a* were blamed and imprisoned for sponsoring what local government officials considered "backward culture that prevents the youth from going to school" (Gebre 1994:831). Government officials of the time are said to have similar attitude towards *melekia* and *gezima* work parties. However, the large majority of Ethiopian peasants resented the imported format of producer cooperatives, while strictly adhering to indigenous production organizations.

The agrarian policy of the military government continued to discriminate local

production organizations, although the gross agricultural product was generated largely by these institutions. Producer cooperatives were entitled to privileges not offered to other local organizations and private peasant cultivators in the country. For instance, they enjoyed guaranteed access to fertile land and priority in distribution or purchase of production inputs (oxen, fertilizer and improved seeds) as well as in extension services (Brune 1990:23; Dessalegn 1990:104). In spite of the privilege and excessive government support, the entire performance of producer cooperatives was very poor. On the contrary, local production organizations are reported to have performed much better. According to Pausewang (1990:219-220), compared to the socialist cooperatives, indigenous institutions were best adapted to local culture and agree with ideals of solidarity, collective responsibility and equity.

#### **Local Organizations Overlooked: conceptual bias**

As briefly indicated above, despite their remarkable contributions, local organizations have not been given the policy attention they deserve. Moreover, although such organizations seem to be dealt with in the African literature, in Ethiopia they suffered from lack of research interest. Such local names as *debo*, *ideir*, *wonfel*, *iqub*, *mahiber*, and *senbete* appear in literature usually as terms to be defined or concepts to be given passing remarks. Except for few contributions on *iqub* (financial institutions) and *idir* (production and funeral associations), no systematic studies have been launched on most other organizations. Since most research activities in the area of production focus on technical aspects, the social aspect of production remained marginally covered. The reason for overlooking local organizations may be explained in relation to two interrelated factors.

The first one has to do with the classical prophecy that peasant-based rural communities and their organizations will disintegrate. Work groups have been depicted as traditional elements of society and examples of vanishing cultures. Therefore, the desirability of transforming traditional modes of organizations into modern forms were sought. According to Johnston and Clark (1982:166), the relevant policy question is when, how, and to what extent to transform traditional institutions into modern organizational forms. This is because, according to them, the two stand in radical contrast to each other. Other reasons have also been advanced to justify the inevitability of the decline of indigenous work parties. For example, cost-benefit calculations on the working of local organizations are said to contradict with rational economic calculations (Manger 1987:14). The idea is that since the cost of beer and food required in work parties is showing a drastic increase, people would resort to wage labor or new organizational models. Here it is important to note the fact that among the Ari and the Gumz sponsoring beer/food party is not considered as payment for the work done. The feast is a social occasion that can also be explained in terms of the local distribution and consumption patterns. For that matter, the number of people participating in the actual work and those taking part in consumption do not coincide.

The second point relates to the growing belief in the role of science and technology. Increased agricultural productivity is explained in terms of technological change, which is expected to result from scientific research. Consequently, a great number of researchers concentrated on the study of such technical fields as soil fertility, drainage system, irrigation potentials, technology, production per unit area, input-output relations, etc. Accordingly, transfer of technology, the use of

chemicals, introduction of new crops, and other "golden strategies" have been suggested for Ethiopia's development. Perhaps all these are important contributions, however, as Bonnen (1990:262) state, increase in productivity arises not from technological change alone but from institutional innovation and improvements in human capital as well. Although it is true that scientific research could result in technological change, one shouldn't forget the fact that the latter existed before science was recognized as a systematic body of knowledge. The unstudied customary practices also may have major impacts on technological change and productivity.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The great concern of most development agents is how to identify the grass-root problems and their respective solutions. Besides identifying development problems and envisaging feasible remedial actions, there is need to find appropriate ways to implement the proposed actions. This raised the question of organizational dimension of development, which in turn makes the relevance of local organizations apparent. It is true that in highly industrialized countries such organizations are less relevant, although in some villages of Japan small farmers still rely on the traditional *yuyi* labor group for productive activities. In countries like Ethiopia where human power is the predominant force, the existence of organization is of paramount importance.

It appears evident that efforts to bring agricultural development in Ethiopia can not be achieved without promoting the capacity of rural organizations engaged in production, farm input distribution, output processing and marketing, and financial services. Most indigenous institutions found in the country are potentially capable of playing these roles. It is likely that project

assistance directed at strengthening local initiatives and local capacities will be more effective through working with such organizations. Hussi (1993) attests that working with village associations have proved very efficient in different parts of Africa, such as in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. This is basically because they operate in line with value systems and the social structure of societies.

In front of the Ethiopian experiences, the idea that local organizations are obsolete, expensive, and declining sounds less relevant. Local work groups have been the sole farm organizational arrangements affordable by and accessible to ordinary people. They have not only persisted in an unfavorable political environment but also demonstrated their capacity to change and adjust to new circumstances. therefore, instead of being entirely discounted or entirely changed, they should be integrated into development programs. Otherwise, as Fleuret (1988:61) remarks, "... any discussion of the organizational dimension of development that fails to include a dynamic, interactive role for indigenous modes of organization is likely to be deficient."

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