Highland communal grasslands for livelihoods and ecosystem services in Ethiopia

Bedasa Eba and Jason Sircely

Key messages

In the highlands of Ethiopia, communal grasslands are a critical resource that provide livestock feed to farmers and ecosystem services to greater society. Most communal grasslands are managed by government-registered user groups, some of whom have received government certification of user rights. However, the absence of community-driven plans for grazing and other management, and insecure land tenure, subject communal grasslands to heavy, almost unregulated grazing, often resulting in land degradation. The lack of rest from grazing reduces the regeneration capacity of grasslands, while heavy and unorganized grazing causes land degradation. Subdividing communal grasslands for cultivation of crops is often unavoidable, yet is frequently unsustainable due to poor soil quality, and reduces ecosystem services including carbon storage, infiltration of rainfall, and erosion control.

To improve the management of communal grasslands in the Menz area of Amhara, International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) researchers conducted system analysis and created a structured process for supporting user groups to better plan grazing and restoration in communal grasslands. The main objectives were to prevent unplanned grazing and target intensive restoration, to allow recovery of vegetation, improve forage production and ecosystem services, and to identify policy recommendations for wider application in highland communal grasslands.

Several lessons relevant to policy emerged during the development and application of the new approach to supporting community grassland management. The area of...
Highland communal grasslands

Communal grasslands are important sources of feed for livestock in many areas of the Ethiopian highlands. However, these grasslands are disappearing due to expansion of cultivation, with the remaining portions of grasslands becoming degraded due to heavy and unorganized grazing. Livestock production is reduced by the decline of feed supplied by grasslands, decreasing farmers’ ability to earn income and livelihoods from livestock products. Contrary to communal grasslands, individual grasslands in Menz were well-managed and in good pasture condition, where a combination of grazing and hay-making counteract degradation through appropriate use intensity. The main cause of degradation of communal grazing lands is unorganized and heavy grazing, which prevents resting and recovery of grasslands, as a result of the current absence of management planning according to farmer objectives.

Communal grasslands have a variety of uses including collection of wood, manure and stones, though farmers prioritized first and foremost their use for livestock grazing. The feed produced by communal grasslands is relatively low compared to other sources (Figure 1), yet these lands provide forage during seasons of feed scarcity, such as during the main ‘kiremt’ rainy season, when other feed sources are not available. The limited degree of governance established to manage natural resources in most communal grasslands (Eba and Sircely 2020a) is a major constraint to good management. Communal grassland user groups were registered with local government, but these user groups had no management plans to guide the use of communal grasslands. While government efforts to issue certificates for communal grassland user rights are ongoing, most user groups in Menz had no certificates. Out of 10 communal grasslands assessed, seven had decreased in area over the last 10 years due to plantation forestry and subdivision among individuals for crop cultivation. No user groups had any experience in planning communal grazing to improve pasture productivity. Increasing grassland productivity will support farmer livelihoods, reduce degradation, and enhance ecosystem services provided by these lands, including carbon storage, infiltration of rainfall, and control of soil erosion.

Outcomes and lessons from grassland management planning

Management planning was conducted in March 2021 for 10 communal grasslands in Menz (Figure 2), all of which have user groups that set by-laws or rules for use. User groups wanted the by-laws to be changed and documented in the local language, Amharic, and that also refer to the kebele (subdistrict) government for enforcement. These requests show that users of communal grasslands have an interest in planning management of their grasslands, but need external assistance in preparing the plan, and guidance and support in enforcing it.

The shrinking size of highland communal grasslands reduces the livestock feed supply and diminishes livestock-based livelihoods. Increasing population and livestock density have driven conversion of grasslands to crops and high use pressure in communal grasslands. For example, one communal grassland had 21 households in the user group, as compared to 10 households 10 years ago. Competition for agricultural land and disputes have become more intense, and intrusion of individualized cropping into communal grasslands has become common. In many cases the subdivision of...
communal grasslands cannot be avoided, for example the distribution of such land to landless youth groups for cultivation, yet cropping on poor soils will likely give only 1 or 2 years of marginal yields according to respondents. This individualization trend results in part from the lack of a practical management plan and unclear user rights, leading to land management that is out of step with the main objective of all user groups consulted—to maintain and use grasslands primarily for livestock feed. A management plan that clearly documents the intended use of grasslands to suit the purposes of the user group will reduce the chances of land use changes that do not suit local goals and interests.

The most important lesson so far is that acquiring a government-issued certificate of user rights for communal grasslands is a key step in securing the land use goals of local farmers. Certification of user rights for communal lands in Amhara is ongoing, with some woredas ahead of others. In Menz Gera Woreda, the certification process is not yet complete, with most communal grasslands still lacking certification (Table 1). In highland farmlands, certification improved perceptions of land tenure security, reduced disputes, and increased use of soil conservation practices (Andarge et al. 2020). The main benefit of certification is to improve the user group’s sense that their land is secure, and will not be used for purposes that they do not approve of, or that they see as less beneficial. With current trends of individualization and conversion of grasslands into other uses, a sense of instability may seem reasonable. Once certification improves the sense of tenure security over a grassland, the user group will be more likely to cooperate than to compete, and more likely to invest time, labour and other expenses into management of the grassland. As the grassland improves, so too will livestock production and the income and livelihoods that farmers receive from their livestock.

Other reasons given for the absence of user rights certification by user groups, woreda experts, and kebele leaders were the little attention received by communal grasslands, disagreements within user groups with many users, subdivision and individualization of communal grasslands, unwillingness of all users to request certification together, and the false assumption of some users that taxes will be charged on the land once certification is given.

Table 1. Accounting of communal grasslands, registered communal grassland user groups, and user groups with and without government certification of user rights, Menz Gera Woreda, Amhara.

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<td>Total communal grasslands</td>
<td>713</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total registered user groups</td>
<td>645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User groups with no certificate of user rights</td>
<td>533</td>
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<tr>
<td>User groups with certificate of user rights</td>
<td>112</td>
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The way forward

A key step is the certification of land use rights in communal grasslands for user groups. Certification will help motivate better planning and management of communal resources. Accelerating the process of communal grassland certification in the highlands will reduce disputes, incentivize more sustainable management, and encourage much-needed investments into the management, restoration and improvement of communal grasslands.
The process created by ILRI researchers for management planning in highland communal grasslands provides the tools and approach for government and other facilitators to support user groups to improve communal grassland management. By starting with the management objectives and priorities of user groups, the process serves the needs of farmers. User groups showed strong interest and willingness in planning management, but they needed assistance and guidance to prepare and document the management plan, and to enforce the plan.

Well-managed communal grasslands, following the example of individual grazing lands in Menz, would significantly improve feed availability, livestock production, and the income and livelihoods of farmers who rely on livestock products. In addition, certifying and planning the management of communal grasslands based on local priorities would go far toward slowing land degradation, encouraging restoration, and enhancing ecosystem services across the Ethiopian highlands.

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References


Contact

Jason Sircely
ILRI
J.Sircely@cgiar.org

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