



Advocacy and credibility of land tenure in Ethiopia: Mitigating conflicts and threats

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ABSTRACT

Social inequality resulting from war, exploitation, and land property is very evident in Ethiopia, which has a significant influence on the economic, social, and political situation of various groups of people. As a result, the primary objective of this study was to assess the significance of the Credibility Thesis in resolving land conflicts via the Formal, Actual, and Targeted (FAT) Institutional Framework. Moreover, this study was conducted to identify the key features and the role of credibility analysis in mitigating land conflicts by employing the Credibility Scales and Intervention (CSI) Checklist. To achieve this goal, a comprehensive literature review including land tenure studies from 1979 to 2020 was conducted. This review used original databases to ensure a comprehensive and extensive exploration of relevant scientific works. The results showed that the land problem in Ethiopia is not only related to the dynamics of social change and inequality at different global, regional, national, and transnational levels, but also provides access to land resources, the foundations of authority, livelihood, property, and citizenship. Furthermore, the lack of land security for non-indigenous minorities contributes to substantial ambiguity for land rights. Therefore, measures to increase land security and transfer land tenure can have an important influence on productivity and should be prioritized by policymakers. These measures may include elements from active land certification initiatives, but they should also specify the legal credit of certifications issued in the system and how to execute them.

1. Introduction

By 1974, policy-makers felt that an allegedly “antiquated” land tenure system was one of the key causes of Ethiopia’s agricultural “backwardness” and the outbreak of the revolution. Therefore, Ethiopia is one of the African countries that began its land reform plan in the mid-1970s (Davies et al., 2020). The early phase of post-colonial land reform focused on restoring land to indigenous people that had been expropriated by colonial regimes, as well as harmonizing land tenure techniques with those adopted by colonial administrations. Today, conflicts still arise due to conflicting claims to land and natural resources in spite of numerous land reforms because of increased tenure security, commercialization of land rights, and improved agricultural production.

From a historical perspective, in Ethiopia, the regional distinction

between north and south has been reflected in differences in land tenure. Farmers’ property rights and the pattern of land tenure policy are largely dependent on the policies that govern the three imperial political regimes, the Derg, and the present regimes (Nagar, 2019; Munshifwa, 2023). The social structure of Ethiopia influenced land tenure policy during the traditional imperial regimes and the types of land tenure during this time are mainly referred to as the imperial administrative classification (Donkor et al., 2023). This classification is between the regimes of grant land (gult), collective (rist), independent or sometimes private (tenure of Gabbar, church (Samon), and government (medria, mengist) tenure regimes (Chala, 2016). This type of land tenure system, which the Ethiopian Empire adopted, is characterized as one of the most complicated sets of land use systems in Africa. This was when only 1 % of property owners in the entire Ethiopian population owned 70 % of the

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fertile land. The imperial regime was overthrown during the Derg Socialist regime, and the agricultural structure and land access mechanisms changed drastically. All rural land was declared national by the Declaration of Public Ownership of National Rural Land, which divided it among its tillers and organized farmers in the form of cooperatives, thus inhibiting landlord-tenant relations, which was felt to be opportune during the imperial regime. In general, agricultural productivity did not increase with the land reform carried out by the Derg regime, and by and large, landless workers, wage laborers, tenant farmers, and the weak "rist right" (collective) owners often prevailed during Derg reforms (Ayano, 2018).

Land tenure security issues in Ethiopia were severely challenged despite the fact that land is an important factor in politics, economics, and society (Agegnehu and Mansberger, 2020; Ege, 2017). To understand the security of current land tenure, briefly, it must be defined (Crewett et al., 2008). The land tenure system is classified into three types: the land tenure system before 1975, the system of land tenure in the Derg regime during 1974–1991, and the present system of land tenure (Melesse and Awel, 2020; Agegnehu, 2023). Land tenure in Ethiopia has long been the subject of political debate, with land ownership governed by customary law or the formal legal system. For decades, customary law alone oversaw and enforced land rights in Ethiopia (Ege, 2017; Melesse and Awel, 2020). In contrast, the formalization of land ownership involved the granting of titles to farmers who cultivated the land or to a large-scale farming programs (Agegnehu, 2023; Melesse and Awel, 2020). Notably, these efforts included the issuance of inalienable rights and not full land ownership (Melesse and Awel, 2020). From 1975 onwards, the new military government, known as the Derg, announced the abolition of the gult system under the slogan "land to the tiller". After the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, land privatization was expected. However, in November of that year, the Ethiopian transitional government announced in its economic policy that it would largely continue the land policy of the Derg regime and that farmers would only have the right to profit (Chitengi, 2020; Crewett and Korf, 2008). Ethiopia's new constitution was adopted in 1995 on the official tenure of land.

From the aspect of women, the constitution formally recognized the granting of land tenure rights to men as well as women, thus empowering them to claim land when land was distributed in the rural areas (Crewett et al., 2008; Melesse and Awel, 2020). It has been argued that in Ethiopia, the tenure system lacks the security required to invest in and increase agricultural productivity and sustainable land use (Chigbu et al., 2019a; Moreda, 2018).

The results of the findings of Djekonbe and Gautier (2020) showed that land tenure negatively influences agricultural productivity and performance in Ethiopia. Conflicts are difficult to avoid when it comes to increasing agricultural output and performance, even with land management systems and land tenure coordination. Chimhowu (2019) identified five results (i.e., designing new category dynamics of land tenure, changing institutional power relations, changing local rankings of land, downsizing smallholder agriculture and growing medium-sized farms, increasing inequality, and possible social differentiation) that showed the legacy of the new customary tenure. Moreda (2018) stated that despite tenure instability in Ethiopia, poor people in the two Amhara study sites are making significant investments to stop and reverse land degradation. However, at different levels, they invest in the security of their land ownership. The results of Agegnehu (2023) showed that the sense of security of farmers' property increases with the formalization of land rights and promotes land-related investments.

Ethiopia is a Sub-Saharan African country that is working hard to ensure sustainable land use through land use planning and securing property rights. However, achieving these goals is difficult due to rapid land use change in most parts of the country (Chigbu et al., 2019b; Deininger et al., 2008). According to Chigbu et al. (2019b), increasing land use to improve people's living conditions is a neglected aspect of local development in Ethiopia. Furthermore, land rent is increasing,

which exacerbates tenure insecurity among farmers. The primary issue lies in the insecurity of underlying land rights, which is leading to escalating conflict levels. There is significant social inadequacy despite rapid economic development. Moreover, there is an unfavorable agricultural structure and significant pressure for land redistribution due to unresolved land tenure issues (Ege, 2017). Consequently, it is essential for Ethiopia to understand land tenure systems, especially conventional systems, when creating sustainable solutions (Kiggundu, 2002; Suchá et al., 2020). Land conflicts are common in Ethiopia, and in many cases, conflicts take on an ethnic dimension (Lavers, 2018). Territorial struggles are known to be the most widespread form of conflict and the largest cause of intergovernmental wars, as well as internal conflicts. Uncertainty over land acquisition is generally considered to be more prevalent in Ethiopia than in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa and has long been at the core of the debate (Chigbu et al., 2019b). Arguments often focus on the relationship between land tenure security and investment in the agriculture sector, productivity, and factors that are related to land conflicts. Therefore, since 2003, programs of land certification have been in place, especially in some parts of Ethiopia, to reduce the extensive insecurity of takeover (Moreda, 2018). It is often argued that the registration of land is necessary to improve and enhance the security of tenure, reduce land disputes, and improve access to credit from financial institutions (Agegnehu, 2023).

Falco et al. (2020) in Ethiopia studied land disputes at the micro-level and found that weaker groups of land rights holders may be discriminated against when land pressures become particularly severe. These groups typically include women, particularly if they are divorced, widowed, or polygamous, orphans, disabled children, illegitimate children, or children of broken marriages whose fathers have remarried.

There are few empirical and practical studies on the distribution of property rights and the security of land tenure in Ethiopia. The potential role of laws related to land and policies in restricting land disputes in the short and medium term has not been sufficiently studied and documented. It also implies that there are few studies on how land reform in Ethiopia affects land registration and certification. Land certification programs are currently under pressure in many parts of Africa. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how these plans influence the rate of land disputes and lead to laws that can decrease disputes and have a decisive impact on poor and vulnerable groups (Persha et al., 2017).

The initial aim of this research is to address the following questions:

Q1) What factors contribute to land conflicts in Ethiopia during the postcolonial period?

Q2) How does the extent and nature of land conflicts in Ethiopia relate to land tenure reforms?

In this context, the contribution of this study lies in three fields: i) identifying the key aspects to consider when managing property rights and land conflicts in Ethiopia, ii) focusing on various Ethiopian perspectives about land tenure, and iii) identifying the role of credibility analysis in mitigating land conflicts based on the Formal, Actual and Targeted Institutional Framework (hereafter: CSI Checklist). In the latter endeavor, the study employs the theory and methodology of the Credibility Thesis (Ho, 2014; 2017), as widely field-tested, for instance, by Fan et al. (2022) and Arvanitidis (2020) for the CSI Checklist, and Wang (2022) and Nor-Hishma (2016) for the FAT Framework.

The current study is divided into six sections. The second section provides a brief overview of corporate governance reform in Ethiopia, including the causes and effects of land conflicts and their types. The third section presents the research approach, methods, and materials. The fourth section is the results and discussion section. The conclusions are discussed in section five, and finally, in the last section, recommendations and policy implications are presented.

2. Land conflicts, land tenure, and credibility

2.1. Conflicts of land in the post-colonial period in Ethiopia

Numerous studies (e.g., Benjamin et al., 2021; Slavchevska et al., 2021) in sub-Saharan Africa, have consistently emphasized the complex nature of land tenure systems. This variation in institutional arrangements results from the historical imposition of ultimate land ownership claims by the (short-lived) colonial and later post-colonial authorities, simultaneously with the manipulation or strengthening of neo-customary tenure by governments as a means of exercising social control. This phenomenon contributes to the complexity of land ownership dynamics in Ethiopia (Cousins, 2019; Chigbu et al., 2019a).

Contrary to the prevailing trend in sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia's approach to the land question is often described as "very unique". The country has adopted a uniform policy for state land ownership in which farmers are granted usufruct rights. Ethiopia's limited exposure to European colonialism (apart from a brief occupation under Mussolini's Italy), along with radical land reforms in 1975, set the land tenure system apart from the wider context of sub-Saharan Africa. These reforms, described as "particularly far-reaching," resulted in the nationalization of all land and the "effective abolition" or "total eradication" of pre-existing tenure systems (Chigbu et al., 2019b). This distinctive framework of land ownership in Ethiopia challenges the multiple and overlapping patterns of ownership commonly observed elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite the undeniable importance of the 1975 land reform in Ethiopia, the nature of land tenure remains ambiguous, particularly concerning the authority associated with both state and non-state actors. This uncertainty is, in part, attributable to the persistent impact of neo-customary tenure systems, many of which were not entirely eradicated by the establishment of state ownership. Paradoxically, these traditional systems seem to have gained ascendancy in recent years, contributing to the complexity of contemporary land tenure (Azadi, 2020; Lawry, 2023).

Furthermore, the introduction of ethnic federalism in the 1990s has added another layer of ambiguity to the Ethiopian land tenure context. Although ethnic federalist principles are similar to neo-customary tenure, the majority of principles directly contradict the idea of state ownership, especially when it comes to the ethnic rights of minorities who are living outside of their designated 'home' regions (Teklemariam and Cochrane, 2021). This territorial dimension introduces a complex interplay between the state, ethnic identity, and land rights, further engendering an intricate web of land tenure dynamics in Ethiopia. Therefore, understanding and navigating these ambiguities is crucial for comprehending the evolving relationship among land tenure systems and the concept of citizenship in the Ethiopian context.

Particularly, land tenure regimes directly affect citizenship rights such as the political importance of ethnicity and the nature of resource conflict (Afrizal and Berenschot, 2022). Among others, on the African continent, Ethiopian land tenure is generally considered an extreme case. Additionally, Ethiopia's distinct ethnic federal system—which grants people the right to own both rural and urban land as well as all natural resources—brings a different viewpoint to the discussion of land, one that is uncommon in the majority of other countries (Mahadew, 2020).

The protest wave that has swept through Oromiya and then Amhara since 2014 has brought these issues' contemporary relevance in Ethiopia to light. Numerous factors, such as government corruption, youth unemployment, insufficient representation of individual and group interests, division within the ruling party since 2012, and an increase in ethno-nationalism, have indicated these protests (Ganta, 2022). But issues of land and territory under ethnic federalism—both in terms of the drawing of ethno-regional borders and the relative importance of land access for the indigenous population and outside investors—were a major source of contention.

2.2. Land tenure reform in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has witnessed three distinct land tenure regimes: the Imperial regime (1837–1974), the Derg military regime (1974–1991), and the present regime (since 1991). These changes in land tenure systems have been influenced by natural resource conditions, infrastructure, population dynamics, and political contexts (Chala, 2016). Despite the reforms, land conflicts have persisted or even been exacerbated. The reasons for the constant conflicts in this land include the preservation of laws, the evolution of combined tenure, or the elimination of the variations between legal and conventional tenure systems (Obayelu, 2020).

In order to solve land conflicts, the graphic documentation of boundaries in the land management system was felt to be importance. Many believed that this method could help reduce land conflicts in the future. In recent years, Ethiopia has undertaken a significant land surveying initiative in certain regions (Gebeyehu, 2011). This step involves graphical documentation of land boundaries (Gebeyehu, 2011), which in principle should not only helps prevent encroachment and illegal land transactions but would also improves land management and helps to reduce conflicts (Chigbu, 2019; Gebeyehu, 2011). Therefore, the incorporation of advanced land surveying techniques and boundary mapping into Ethiopia's land governance framework is regarded as a significant step toward improving land tenure security and reducing land conflicts (Chigbu et al., 2019a; Gebeyehu, 2011).

2.3. Theoretical and analytical framework

The relation between formal (titled) land tenure versus conflict has been extensively analyzed from the theoretical perspective of the Credibility Thesis (Ho, 2014; 2017). In this view, the specific form in which land tenure manifests (regardless whether it is formal/informal, secure/insecure or private/public) is equally important, if not, following from the function that land tenure fulfils for resource users. As the Credibility Thesis postulated: "what ultimately determines the performance of institutions is not their form in terms of formality, privatization, or security, but their spatially and temporally defined function. In different wording, institutional function presides over form; the former can be expressed by its credibility, that is, the perceived social support at a given time and space" (ibid.: 13-4). In an appraisal of the thesis, the *Yale Environment Review* wrote that: "credibility is a powerful metric" and "has much to offer both the academic and practitioner perspective on tenure analysis and policy" (Griswold, 2015). Since it was mooted, the Credibility Thesis has been applied for the analysis of various resources and issues in the Global North and Global South, including but not limited to: Formal and informal land tenure (Fan et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2022; Tzfadia et al., 2020; Koroso et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2018; Pils, 2016); Settlements and housing (Zhou and Yau, 2023; Manara, 2022; Celhay and Gil, 2020; Oranje et al., 2020; Zhang, 2018); Common property and customary law (Ghorbani et al., 2021; Arvanitidis and Papagianitsis, 2020; Easthope et al., 2020; Nor-Hisham, 2016); Natural resources, such as grassland, waters and minerals (Fan et al., 2019; Fold et al., 2018; Gomes and Hermans, 2018; Mollinga, 2016; Zhao, 2016). The thesis is predicated on studies contrasting formal ownership to the allegedly "inefficient", informal yet, oft-functioning property rights around the world, efforts described by Nobel Prize laureate, Elinor Ostrom as research accounting for "the ambiguity of certain property regimes" by uncovering "who owns' various resources" (Ostrom and Hess, 2007: 32). In this context, there are also evident synergies between Ostrom and the Credibility Thesis. For instance, Ghorbani et al. (2021) employed Agent-Based Modelling to validate the thesis in a common property context. Likewise, by expanding Ostrom's notion of the commons, Easthope et al. (2020) validated that Form follows Function in urban commons. In another study, Arvanitidis (2020) coupled the two theories to demonstrate that common property can achieve credibility while catering for critical ecological and social functions. For its analysis, this article will tentatively use (selected) frameworks developed under the Credibility Thesis, with particular reference to the FAT

Framework and the CSI Checklist (Ho, 2016). Each of these are respectively discussed below.

2.3.1. Formal, actual, and targeted (FAT) institutional framework

The FAT institutional framework, depicted in Fig. 1 operates across three dimensions: Formal, Actual, and Targeted (Krul and Ho, 2020; Sun and Ho, 2020; Zeković et al., 2020). Formal institutions encompass legal and policy frameworks, with their effectiveness measured by their alignment with Actual and Targeted dimensions. When institutions deviate from this alignment, they rally less aggregate social support from resource users, and in effect, become less credible (Krul and Ho, 2020). For instance, research corroborated that a *greater* divergence between the three dimensions is associated with a *lower* credibility (Nor-Hisham, 2016), while conversely, a *higher* credibility is coupled to a *lower* divergence (Arvanitidis and Papagianitsis, 2020; Sun and Ho, 2018).

For our purposes, the FAT framework can be applied to examine three key questions: 1) What formal tenure rights exist? (e.g., legally granted rights); 2) What land property rights are exercised in practice? and 3) What land property rights do individuals aspire to have?

We should note that the FAT framework (Fig. 2) is dynamic, as institutional arrangements can change over time and under different circumstances. Stakeholder perceptions of institutions are central to this framework, encompassing designated formal rights, realized property rights, and desired property rights (Ho, 2014; Sun and Ho, 2020).

2.4. Credibility and CSI (Credibility Scales and Intervention) checklist

The credibility of institutions is not determined solely by individuals but rather in an intricate interaction with aggregate societal support. It depends on complex and multi-layered resonance of institutions with the prevailing culture and (co-)existing institutions and hinges on their ability to achieve intended goals while aligning with social expectations (Chen, 2020; Kim and Brown, 2015). In light of the complexity through which credibility affects institutions and vice versa, credibility is best conceptualized as existing on a continuum, with varying degrees rather than as a binary phenomenon of credible versus non-credible institutions (Ho, 2014).

In light of this, interventions such as formalization and titling need careful consideration, and be rethought as posited on a continuum as well. Put differently, formalization and titling need to be seen as but one small building block of an entire set of policy tools that can be crafted and used depending on the level of credibility. This realization is what spurred the development of the CSI Checklist, which as a comprehensive toolbox allows decision-makers to identify potential policies for better land management (Ho, 2018). Importantly, the CSI Checklist

emphasizes the importance of treating the policy decision *not* to intervene with the same gravity as intervening, while acknowledging that credibility does not rely on absolute metrics but rather thrives within a relative and contextual continuum. Or, as Arvanitidis (2020: 4) duly noted: "...as credibility increases, intervention prescriptions lessen, indicating that for higher levels of institutional credibility the appropriate policy measures should range from co-opting (i.e. formalizing what is already practiced) to condoning (i.e. accepting daily praxis with a 'hands-off' approach). Political orthodoxies often involve strict "binary" regulations and the constraining of social expression, in turn leading to the establishment of 'empty' institutions (Ho, 2017) disconnected from social actors' actual experiences. However, such imposed institutions may not guarantee sustainability or social acceptability. In contrast, the complex institutional continuum on which traditional, informal, and seemingly 'insecure' rights exist may credibly assume critical social responsibilities, distinct from economic transactions. Against this backdrop, the CSI Checklist elucidates how in lieu of binary measures, more contextually-sensitive solutions could be adopted. Table 1 illustrates the CSI scale's ideal types, delineating potential institutional interventions and non-interventions relative to existing credibility levels. These interventions may encompass 1) issuing directives, 2) imposing prohibitions, 3) providing assistance, 4) formalizing existing practices, and 5) endorsing daily routines. Since its development, the CSI Checklist has been applied for the analysis of the credibility of different land use policies, such Land Value Capture tools in Colombia (Pérez-Moreno, 2024), Payment for Ecological Services in China (Fan et al., 2022), the management of urban commons in Greece (Arvanitidis, 2020), and the renewal of informal settlements in China (Liu and Zhang, 2020). Whereas the former two studies found that market-based policy tools run a significant risk of lowered credibility when not cautiously deployed, the latter two concluded that land use policies could rally significant credibility when giving space to the existing functions of commons and informal settlements.

3. Methodology

This review article used a rigorous methodological approach that drew from a diverse set of multidisciplinary sources and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data.

3.1. Literature review and data collection

This study conducted a systematic review of the literature and addressed important aspects related to land dispute management and land tenure rights in Ethiopia. The main objective was to explore Ethiopian perspectives on managing land disputes and property rights and to identify the role of credibility in land conflicts, using the CSI checklist.

The research methodology was performed in four steps as follows:

The first step involved a thorough search from 1997 to 2022 for original articles across a number of databases, including ISI Web of Science, Elsevier Science, Springer, ProQuest, Oxford University Press, and SID. The main keywords used to obtain the data were 'land use change' along with other relevant concepts including, 'Ethiopia', 'credibility', 'tenure', 'security', and 'advocacy'. These keywords were combined with 'tenure security', 'advocacy of land', 'credibility of land', 'tenure in Ethiopia', 'mitigating conflicts', and 'threats'. The initial search resulted in 679 original articles.

A few inclusion and exclusion criteria for original articles were used in the second phase. As a result, the titles and abstracts of these articles were selected with an emphasis on the advocacy, legitimacy, conflicts, and land tenure in Ethiopia. Hence, the articles dealing with land use change, land cover change, and land and land governance, were excluded. This step resulted in 320 journal articles.

The articles' methodology was assessed in the third step, and the ones with proper methodological approaches/sampling were selected. In the last step, the number of original papers decreased to 100.

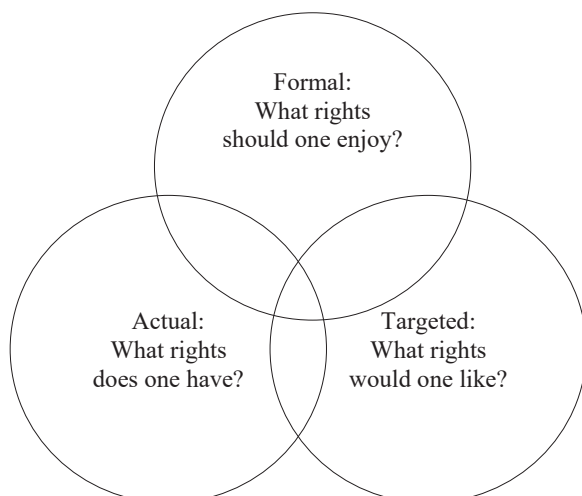


Fig. 1. FAT Institutional Framework. Source: (Krul and Ho, 2020).

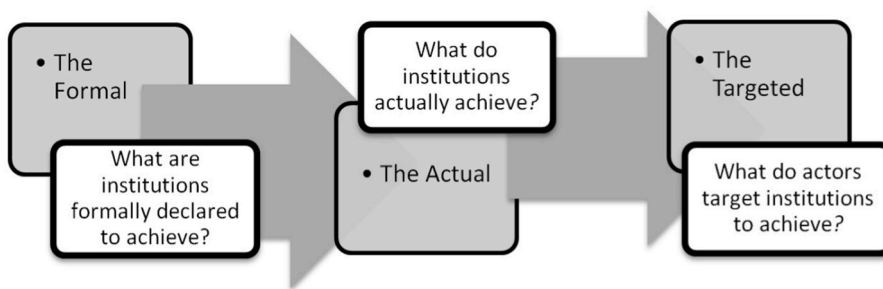


Fig. 2. FAT Institutional Framework. Source: Adjusted based on (Ho, 2016)

Table 1
Credibility Scales and Intervention (CSI) Checklist.

Credibility level/trend	Institutional intervention	Desired effect
High	Condoning	Accepting praxis without intervention
Medium high	Co-opting	Formalizing what is done
Neutral	Facilitating	Supporting what needs to be done
Medium low	Prohibiting	Dictating what shall not be done
Low	Ordaining	Commanding what must be done

Source: Ho (2016)

3.2. Qualitative data analysis

Fig. 3 shows the different steps of data collection and analysis. This figure presents all procedures that must be taken to address a range of issues (e.g., land tenure and Ethiopian studies). The initial step was to obtain extensive data (1979–2020) from various sources (e.g., Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Science Direct). Finally, those studies that focused on reducing disputes and threats related to land tenure in Ethiopia and contributing to the CSI checklist in land tenure protection were selected for analysis.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Advocacy interventions and land tenure

Based on the results of this study, advocacy mainly includes training, support for security planning, and enhancing access to various services, especially in Ethiopia. Supporting the development of an emerging field requires monitoring and evaluation. Advocacy can play an important role in reducing crime and increasing empowerment, especially for the economically disadvantaged in Ethiopia. This includes providing informal guidance and support for land security planning as well as expanding access to a variety of services. The results also show that advocacy can be an independent service, receiving referrals from health care providers, or can be part of a multi-component (and possibly multi-organizational) invasion provided by service personnel or others in Ethiopia. In addition, in Ethiopia, parts of the system that supporters work with, such as a ministry, are part of a set of intergovernmental, cultural, and political institutions. Accordingly, advocacy efforts in Ethiopia include promoting policy changes, raising awareness, improving access to services, strengthening collaboration between different stakeholders, and empowering communities in land system management.

The findings also showed that changing land laws does not simply enhance access to some lands but may lead to fundamental changes in existing power structures. In Ethiopia, advocacy networks are frequently transnational and include a wide range of various types of actors, such as governmental and intergovernmental institutions and private actors like

1. Comprehensive search		2. Inclusion/exclusion criteria		3. Evaluation	4. Data extraction and Synthesis
Database	Main keywords	Relevant article	Data availability		
ISI Web of Science Elsevier Science Springer ProQuest Oxford University Press SID	Land use change, Ethiopia, Credibility, Tenure, Security, Advocacy. These keywords were combined with: Tenure security, Advocacy of land, Credibility of land, Tenure in Ethiopia, Mitigating conflicts, Threats	Included: Title and abstract on advocacy, credibility, conflicts, and land tenure in Ethiopia Excluded: Land use change, land cover change, and land and land governance	Different dimensions of land tenure security	Methodological quality	Major factors: Land tenure security, land conflicts, land threats, and methods type
679 Articles		320 Articles	100 Articles		

Fig. 3. The flowchart of research methodology steps. Source: Study findings.

companies. In this regard, findings by Rivas et al. (2015), Soyer et al. (2019), Barrett et al. (2016), Cox and FAO (2002), and Isaacs et al. (2020) indicated that advocacy is a set of intergovernmental, economic, political, and cultural institutions that aim to achieve gender equality in land ownership.

4.2. Security in land and land-based resources

The findings of this study underscore the profound consequences of poor land management in Ethiopia and shed light on its links to conflicts, reduced economic and social opportunities, and land degradation. Consequently, secure land tenure emerges as a central solution that can be achieved through a variety of mechanisms when the rights of land users and owners are clearly defined. These include long-term leases, recognition of customary rights, informal settlements, and formal titles, each providing distinct sets of rights and varying degrees of security and responsibility in land ownership.

This specific land tenure structure significantly affects many developing regions in Ethiopia. While conservation concerns abound in these areas, land conservation organizations in Ethiopia have also been working to address land tenure challenges. However, there is a shift in this approach as these organizations are now considering a more holistic approach and integrating additional strategies into their plans. In this paradigm shift, participatory and people-oriented approaches are identified as central to the process and emphasize the importance of the participation of local communities. At the same time, effective institutional frameworks and policies are considered necessary to support access to land use plans. As shown by Ajefu and Abiona (2020), Katusiime and Schütt (2020), and Muchomba (2017), these supports must be tailored to the specific needs of beneficiaries and ensure a delicate balance in managing inequalities between different sectors and actors.

Land-based resources, encompassing soil, water, and crops, constitute the foundation of agricultural systems (Tesfaye et al., 2023). Zerga (2016) argued that, when land tenure is insecure, it often leads to hesitant investments in soil conservation practices and water management initiatives. Farmers may be reluctant to implement long-term strategies for sustainable land use, as the uncertainty about land ownership creates a disincentive for adopting costly and time-consuming measures. Additionally, insecure land tenure can impact crop choices. Ethiopian farmers may opt for short-term and less sustainable cultivation practices due to the lack of confidence in their land tenure status. This can result in soil degradation and reduced water efficiency, compromising the overall health and productivity of the land (Wayessa, 2020). Therefore, land tenure (in)security in Ethiopia has multifaceted effects on land-based resources, influencing decisions related to soil conservation, water management, and crop choices (Wayessa, 2020).

4.3. Conflicts and threats in land tenure

According to the findings, in Ethiopia, threats and disputes are part of the human community. This relates to power relations and role differentiation, division of functions, and positions of scarce resources. The results show that land and dispute are close to each other because land is a critical resource for societies and people. In Ethiopia, the loss of property rights (e.g., ownership of individual resources and special security for women) is a source of human dissatisfaction that can cause conflict. Thus, as productivity increases or new opportunities for income increase with rapid population growth, competition on the land rises and may be manipulated by the elite.

Based on the information in Table 2, the results of this study have identified a specific type of conflict. This category includes the conflict category, which defines the nature of the conflict and identifies the main components involved in each of the six conflict categories. Based on the findings of Azeez and Onyema (2013), Dhanjal (2020), Kasimbazi (2017), Azadi (2020), and Kalabamu (2019), competition within societies is often complexly structured by rules governing tenure.

Table 2
A typology of tenure conflict.

Conflict Type	Description	Central Factors
Type (1): Succession Disputes	Most succession disputes are on a small scale at the level of individual households, with just a few large-scale fights over posts within customary authority.	Household-level succession disputes: rising competition for land, significant intertribal variances in succession procedures, significant differences between tribal norms and state law, a poor proclivity to record judgments or issues, and other scams; Conflicts over bloodlines in customary hierarchy succession difficulties (re-engineering by state and rebel state administrations)
Type (2): Contract Legitimacy Disputes	Conflicts over the legality and recognition of contracts and titles issued by conflicting customary/tribal, government, and/or rebel government administrations	Conflict-related displacement, increased land competition, ambiguous Congolese land law (irregularly defined legal duality between state law and ethno-tribal traditions, opaque norms and practices for contract validation and maintenance [emphyteutic leases, concessionary titles, acquisitive prescription, etc.]), cumulative backlogs for contract registration and titling, contradictory cultural notions of land rights, and widespread misunderstanding of both tribe and territorial law Fraud are the results of several transactions involving dishonest individuals and rebel state, or tribal officials as well as the uneven application of the law and contract enforcement.
Type (3): Boundary Disputes	Controversy over concessions, customary plots, community lands, and public lands	Growing land competition, problems in cadastral systems and other institutional characteristics of tribal and state institutions; fraud by rebel states and tribal officials; a lack of uniform legal authority; and a lack of contract enforcement are all contributing issues.
Type (4): Land Use Conflicts	Land use conflicts, mainly between small farmers and cattle farmers, but also between hunter-gatherers and/or artisanal miners	Conflicting cultural interpretations of land rights; increased land competition; deterioration of traditional, semi-formal land use and secondary rights contracts; ambiguity or lack of formal land use contracts; unauthorized use and occupation of land; and an absence of reliable legal authority and contract enforcement.
Type (5): Contentious Land Occupations	Possession of contested small-farm plots, common spaces, private concessions, nature reserves, and other public properties by displaced people or other small farmers; see also contract types 1–4	View the complete list of elements under Contract Types 1–4. Additionally, there is opposition to recent and/or historical instances of eminent domain (such as when national parks were being created), displacement due to conflict, the perception that foreigners are displacing locals, mobilization on the basis of ethnicity rather than politics, the proliferation of

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Conflict Type	Description	Central Factors
Type (6): Forced Evictions	a) Legal evictions of unlawful land occupiers; b) Illegal evictions of legal land inhabitants; and c) Illegal evictions in instances of ambiguous titles	small arms, shifting power dynamics, and militia and/or informal military involvement. See all of the criteria indicated under conflict types 1–5; moreover, extensive informal participation contains regular and/or irregular armed forces personnel in eviction activities.

Formulated in response to the ever-evolving dynamics of politics, society, and the economy, these laws play a pivotal role in shaping the competitive landscape. The risk of conflict arises when these tenure rules fail to seamlessly adapt to ever-changing conditions, potentially leading to a mismatch between societal needs and the regulatory framework.

4.4. Conflicts and insecure land tenure in Ethiopia

This study clarifies the intricate dynamics of conflicts that can arise among families, neighbors, villages, and users of diverse resources like ranchers and farmers. The complexities extend to conflicts between various ownership regimes (customary tenure, common ownership, and private ownership), different ethnic groups, and varying economic strata. Complicating the resolution process are divergent understandings of property rights, coupled with unequal access to economic, political, legal, and social resources that individuals employ to assert their claims.

In this regard, [Azeez and Onyema \(2013\)](#), [Dhanjal \(2020\)](#), and [Kasimbazi \(2020\)](#) emphasized that cultural nuances are prevalent in traditional African societies. Accordingly, the resolution of conflicts is intricately interwoven with the values and norms inherent in the communities, highlighting the importance of considering cultural dimensions in any effective land dispute resolution strategy.

The findings of this study also indicated that in Ethiopia, the land policy has been debatable because of the collapse of the Derg socialist regime in 1991. Land reform authorities assert that the main restriction to increasing agricultural production is land scarcity and population pressure in Ethiopia. However, land scarcity affects agricultural production. In addition, the structure of land ownership, lack of proper land ownership, as well as the lack of improvement in agricultural technology and climate change in this country are influential. This is mainly a major problem, especially in most sub-Saharan African countries, including Ethiopia. Historical background, cultural and ethnic diversity, and geographical diversity have created very different forms of land use and ownership. The most well-known types of tenure were the "kinship/rist", private, ecclesiastical, and public maintenance systems. Ethiopia's land tenure policy has changed dramatically over the past five decades. While the present Ethiopian administration has pursued a land policy based on government possession of land (in which only landowners are given the right to use), many economists in the agriculture field and international contributor agencies have promoted some kind of private land ownership. In Ethiopia, land disputes are the result of conceptual facts and distributional policies.

Furthermore, the findings show that conflicts and threats of land tenure in Ethiopia are directly and indirectly related to the focus on livestock employment and farmers' conflicts due to land redistribution affecting their livelihood capitals (i.e., physical, financial, natural, and social capitals).

In addition, due to the numerous settlements, there have been unrestrained requests for property and numerous land disputes, including confrontations between ranchers and farmers, intensive groundwork, and irrational attacks on protected areas. However, the rest of Ethiopia

likewise has severe land shortages and extensive land disputes while having a nearly zero population density. The prevalence of colonialism, Western ideals, and the possession of foreign territories and legal systems appear to have increased land disputes and threats in Ethiopia, regardless of population size and density.

In Ethiopia, disproportionate distribution or redistribution of land leads to more land-related conflicts. Problems concerning farmers' conflicts are a real concern in Ethiopia. Different conflicts against the farming community have not started recently and show a different nature. Based on the findings, some are related to water shortages, animal theft, and the destruction of growing areas. There are many land conflicts in Ethiopian villages where ethnic conflicts have taken place, and there has been no comprehensive ethnic cleaning, which may be intended by ethnic federalism. There are various cases of similar situations in which non-indigenous minorities have been relocated or threatened with such action. As mentioned by [Chitengi \(2020\)](#), [Melesse and Awel \(2020\)](#), [Lavers \(2018\)](#), [Maiangwa \(2017\)](#), [Bottazzi et al. \(2016\)](#), and [Kalabamu \(2019\)](#), the pressures and conflicts between these rules and competing opinions about land titles are wider, while the government's response to minority land rights violations is very uniform. Therefore, it is no surprise that new conflicts over land inequality will arise in the coming years.

4.5. Formal, actual, and targeted (FAT) perspectives

Despite the obvious advantages of land tenure, this study showed that assertions that focus primarily on the need for advocacy and legitimacy in land management should be read with care. This is because the mere "form" of titles accounts for just a portion of the real impact, and hence the success of land tenure and management lobbying, credibility, and titling policies.

At first view, formal, institutional, and governance activities in the research region seem to be working. Before the deadline, local administrations fulfilled the formal goals and issued new, unified titles in the majority of regions. From the perspective of the Targeted, titling received a lot of support from households and local government, although families thought borders and plot sizes were clear-cut. Thus, the land reform looks credible even when only looking at the most obvious form of formalization of land title.

When zooming in on the Actual, as shown in [Table 3](#), the inadequacies of the land reform become obvious. For starters, representatives from the investigated counties agreed that a lack of time, resources, and people prevented an on-site inspection and inquiry. Alternatively, the registered data was not updated but simply copied and repeated from previous records, estimated by officials or farmers, or based on averages (i.e., by dividing the total communal land by the number of farmers or plots in a community, individual plot sizes are determined). In addition, the execution of the land reform revealed significant regional variation linked to the historical complexity and local circumstances, notwithstanding national norms and

Table 3
Summary of data according to FAT framework.

Formal	Actual	Targeted
Extensive use of a new, unified title	Due to resource, time, and money limitations, there was no definite on-site surveying	Support for titling from pertinent local actors
Localized explanation and confirmation of land rights	No clear physical boundaries of lands	Farmers regard boundaries and land sizes as being clear
Execution at the scheduled time	There is no common standard for depicting land borders In disputed regions, no titles were granted Farmers exhibit a poor comprehension of ownership and leasing rights	

recommendations. This was shown in the significant difference in boundary registration (including hand-drawn map, historical rather than actual maps, lacking physical limits, or stated merely in words). Furthermore, in areas where land disputes had already erupted, titles were not often granted, even if they had been produced.

The results suggest three features that characterize the existing state of Ethiopian land tenure management as an institutional compromise: (i) a “homogeneous” title might satisfy the central authorities as they can claim that policy aims and objectives have been achieved; (ii) despite the fact that titling was not finished by the deadline, local authorities can brag about a reasonably smooth and uncomplicated implementation of the program; and (iii) farmers’ interests are served since their rights, as they see them, are now entrenched in a new state-approved document, even though that document is distant from reality and most farmers are unaware of the rights specified in the title.

4.6. Credibility scales and intervention (CSI) perspective

In communities all around the world, land is a significant cause of conflict. Land conflicts between families, neighbors, and communities over inheritance, borders, and holding rights are prevalent in many regions of the world. Different strategies for resolving these conflicts have evolved in all communities. The majority of cases handled by informal, quasi-formal, and formal or regular conflict resolution agencies involve land disputes. Due to the fact that insecurity in land tenure is a major constraint on sustainable land use in Ethiopia and developing countries, the government launched a program to secure land tenure by issuing a rural land certificate. It is widely assumed the Ethiopian land reformation of 1975 abolished various tenure systems, resulting in an almost identical and unambiguous system of formal land tenure. To be sure the development of federalism has had direct and important consequences for the management of land, especially in the case of the rights of non-indigenous ethnic minorities. Meanwhile, however, in many parts of the country, neo-traditional tenure systems have preserved their influence to varying degrees. Markedly, in recent years, the government has also attempted, as a means to better achieve its policy goals, to strengthen and re-establish the customary tenure. Thus, in Ethiopia, (and other countries around the world, for that matter), land tenure is often more complex and amalgamated than previously assumed. This study investigates the significance of credibility analysis in understanding land conflicts with particular reference to the Formal, Actual, and Targeted Institutional Framework.

Finally, the state policy for advocacy and credibility of land tenure is different in the context of Ethiopia. In the empirical analysis, state policy measures were preliminarily analyzed, appraised, and summarized using the CSI checklist (Table 4) Based on this analysis, we found that the state interventions in land tenure varied from direction and prohibition to co-optation and acceptance. In concrete terms, these included a range of interventions such as demolitions, forced expropriation and

imposed land titles, as well as symbolic legalization taxes, financial condoning and the postponement of measures. Correspondingly, in relative terms, the credibility featured different levels from low, medium and high.

5. Conclusion

In the post-colonial era of Ethiopia, understanding the factors influencing land conflicts and their relationship with land tenure reforms is essential. This study has aimed to clarify these important aspects by using the theory of credibility and its associated methods. While tenure security measures can provide certain benefits (e.g., increased investment in land-related activities, improved efficiency in land transfers, and access to credibility using land as collateral), the issue of land in contemporary Ethiopia goes beyond economic considerations and encompasses social security and equity. This study has shown a complex network that plays a role in land tenure security. These factors include tenure insecurity, issues related to ethnic and national identity, and the overarching control of the state over land ownership. By examining the relationship between the scale and nature of land conflicts and land tenure reforms in Ethiopia, this study highlights the importance of measures to increase land security and simplify tenure transfers, emphasizing their potential for positive productivity gains. At the same time, however, it should be recognized that Ethiopian (customary and non-customary) land tenure also plays a crucial role in ensuring social security, i.e., land as a means of buffering exogenous social and economic shocks for lower income groups. Implementing legal measures, such as land certification to strengthen tenure security and facilitate tenure transition are important as such interventions can have an effect on productivity and strengthen sustainable agricultural practices. However, their success ultimately depends on the credibility of certificates and their effective implementation. In this regard, it needs emphasizing that although institutions are the result of planned and deliberate intentions, they are often realized in a significantly different way from what was basically intended. We therefore argue that before modifying institutional structures, either formal or informal, one must first examine the perceived purpose of current property rights to avert externalities. It is crucial to note that the results of our analysis are specific to Ethiopia and may not be directly applicable to other countries facing similar challenges. In addition, there could be additional limitations to this study, such as the focus on specific regions (e.g., urban areas) or the potential influence of external factors (such as shifts in taxation or trade regulations) not considered in the analysis. Future research should delve further into the effects of land tenure security, its relationship with conflicts, household outcomes, and the role of women in shaping development policies. These areas warrant continued investigation to inform policy and decision-making for sustainable land management and conflict resolution in Ethiopia.

Table 4
Matrix of measures of state intervention in land tenure in Ethiopia.

Type	Credibility level	Character of desired effects of intervention	Advocacy context	Credibility context
Direction	Low	Commanding, ordaining	Demolition; threats; forced expropriation; imposed land titles	Selective taxing of extra-profiteers
Prohibition	Medium-low	Prohibitive, banning	Measures of banning individual construction; banning private developers’ land; one-off tax payment for land; limited access to finance	Disabled connections to the public utility enterprises for all lands without a title permit
Facilitation	Neutral	Facilitative, supportive	Enabled connections to the utility infrastructure; very small fines; minimal documentation; exemptions equal to the fee; local planning commissions	Simple registration of lands; improved system of real estate management; public calls for legalization
Co-optation	Medium-high	Supportive, prescribed	Mandatory local plan for legalization; program for developing land; strategy of social services; legalization commissions	Advocacy acceptance; innovations in the real estate registry; legalization based on one document
Acceptance, condonation	High	Non-intervention	Symbolic legalization tax or free legalization; fiscal and financial condoning; postponement	No reaction from institutions; silent acceptance; weak institutional capacity; financial support

6. Recommendation and policy implications

Based on the findings of this research, several policy recommendations and implications can be derived as follows:

- To reduce and resolve conflicts related to land and natural resources, fostering community participation in the development of land management frameworks is essential. Involving local communities in decision-making processes can lead to more sustainable and less contentious land management practices.
- Ethiopia can benefit from studying the experiences of other countries that have undergone land reform processes. Lessons learned from these experiences can inform the development of effective land policies, laws, and institutions.
- Understanding land as a critical and distinct natural resource is essential. The unique characteristics of productive land in Ethiopia should be considered when formulating land management strategies and mitigating the root causes of conflicts.
- Given the complex nature of land conflicts, a multi-faceted approach to state interventions is recommended. This approach should encompass various activities in relation to existing levels of institutional credibility, considering both the political and practical aspects of land reform. Recognizing that formal institutions may be weak in many cases, efforts should be made to strengthen these institutions, including legal frameworks and governance structures. Government support for such measures is crucial for their successful implementation.
- To gain a comprehensive understanding of sustainable development and land management, it is essential to establish institutions or groups that promote informal, bottom-up, empirically-grounded explanations. An interdisciplinary approach that incorporates various perspectives can yield valuable insights.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Hossein Azadi: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Shaghayegh Ehteshammajd:** Writing – review & editing. **Imaneh Goli:** Writing – review & editing. **Narges Siamian:** Writing – review & editing. **Saghi Movahhed Moghaddam:** Writing – review & editing. **Peter Ho:** Conceptualization. **Kristina Janečková:** Writing – review & editing. **Petr Sklenička:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

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