# Shumsheha site-specific topic: Communal land squatting

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The data obtained from different categories of respondents seem to suggest that community land squatting for agriculture has been gradually growing from irregular individual practice to community concern. It all started when some individuals could increase the size of their legal farmland by pushing year after year a bit farther in to the bordering communal land area. But squatting has become a community-wide practice in that not only land owning but mainly landless people are involved in creating their own land by illegally tilling hillside community land.The landless persons who were formally given some plots of communal land for house building are among the squatters encroaching beyond their new homestead. As many respondents revealed, the majority of people living around hills have taken and tilled some plots of land from communal areas. This was mentioned as one of the reasons why it was difficult to stop it at all and for the absence of legal/customary action against the squatters. Kebele leaders argued that there was no legal support for them to take any action against squatters, because, they could not take such cases to the social court as land related disputes are out of its authority, nor to the land committee as it didn’t have legal support to decide on community land but only on registered/certified personal land related cases. Unlike the case in Yetmen kebele, communal land in Shumsheha was not measured/registered which may have been contributing to the complication of related disputes and decision-making.

It is worth noting that community reaction to land squatting was mixed: the majority of respondents were sympathetic to squatters, arguing that they were forced by ever-increasing scarcity of land as a general community problem. However, some informants indicated that there were only a few persons who were secretly complaining/wanted action against land squatting One informant, for example, indicated that even the few concerned individuals were expressing their worries often during their informal talking and not formally in public, mainly because they fear inter-kin group conflict could arise. Many other informants reported that those who were not involved in squatting were informally arguing that the practice was aggravating the prevailing shortage of grazing pasture area for livestock. Regarding communal grazing land, the general concern maintained among the informants responding in all the different modules was the threat coming from government interventions. The majority of them argued that communal hillside grazing areas were being reduced through government watershed development projects and zero-grazing/protected community forest creation interventions. Added to this, individual illegal farmland-taking practices were taking place and encroaching on hillsides from every direction. However, only module 12 respondents revealed this very specific concern. Hence the facts that only a few people were reported as complaining against squatting without daring to take the case to formal/informal decision makers; squatting was reported to have continued every year at a different rate; and the kebele formal structure and community institutions didn’t take any decisive action, all seeming to suggest that squatting was not perceived as a threat and/or became one of the community’s accepted methods of modifying the local tenure system under pressure from inter-generational landlessness.

**Contributing factors and economic and social implications:** according to disaggregated data from the kebele documents, out of the total 1366 households in the community 384 households (28.11%) are landless. The data obtained from the community seem to suggest that inter-generational landlessness, farmland displacement due to airport construction, and grazing area forest protection/zero-grazing, were among factors contributing to/pushing for land squatting as a long-term consequence. There has not been any official land redistribution done since the first EPRDF-led distribution was carried out in 1985. As a result, many young households have been emerging in the absence of any formal land access mechanism. All dependent children at the time of land redistribution did not receive their own land and are now among the landless household heads. Members of this generation could have only little access to land through customary mechanisms, by inheritance from parents and through share cropping arrangements. It is therefore important to note that the children of this generation are likely to be among the most severely affected landless as their parents would have no or little own land to provide them. Moreover, there were many different categories of landless people including those who were not in the kebele during the land redistribution or came from other areas later. The data also indicate that among the first land redistribution beneficiaries those who had many dependent children were not later able to provide enough from from their own land for each child or a very small plot was given to each so that children of the later generation are more affected by now. Many landless and poor respondents commonly mention their displacement by the airport as the benchmark for their wealth status going down. The airport was constructed on the most fertile plain farm land, displacing 102 households who had all their lands in that specific place taken away and 62 households partially with small plots left. They were provided compensation money of 7000-30000 birr, but many of them were not successful in investing it and have now become poor. These categories of forced landless people are among the most affected.

Generally, land scarcity has been increasingly complicated due to multiples of economic, social, policy related factors. As a result, land access either through formal or customary tenure systems seems to have become difficult. Inter-generational transfer of the same plots of land is likely to affect the capacity of the family institution/ inheritance. On the other hand, the official land tenure policy does not seem to provide practical/legal outlets, as there has been no more land redistribution since the first. Apparently in recognition of this , the kebele administration has been trying to allocate extra farm land under its control to a few landless and in replacement for individual land taken for public buildings; it has provided house building places from communal areas for more than 150 emerging young households; and allocated protected forest hillside areas for cooperative business/production. Interestingly, it was in such a complex context that communal land squatting has been taking place. Is this a community response to an existing tenure crisis? Why didn’t the formal institutions try to stop squatting or for how long would they tolerate such an illegal means of land acquisition? This and many other questions need further study.