

Cooperation for Fragmentation: Reflection on Ethiopians Conceptualization of Freedom and Independence

Tsegaye Tegenu, PhD
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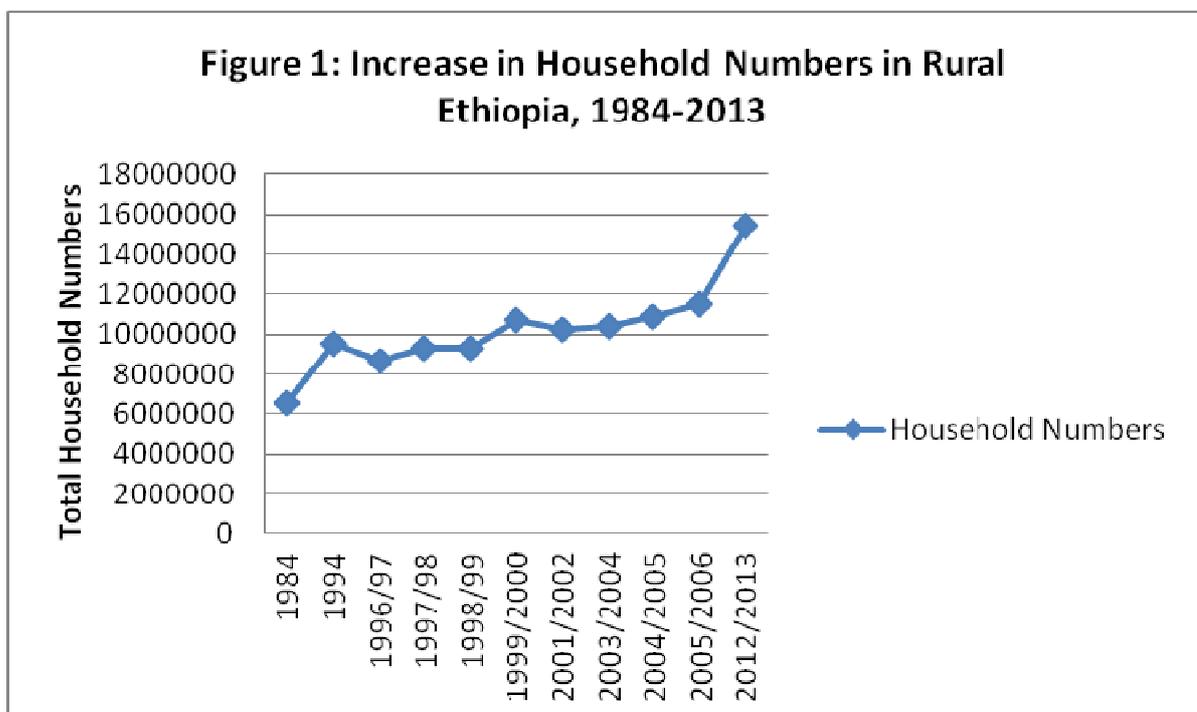
I understand Ethiopians concept of freedom as to mean not to be restricted by others and not to be dependent on others. Since freedom is attained through community, we cooperate with others for the purpose of keeping our individual right to determine own actions. There is a relation between social co-operation and individual independence and freedom. In our case social cooperation is done for the purpose of ensuring our individual independence and right of doing whatever we love to do. We do not cooperate with those who do not respect our thoughts and actions. It is the individual and not the society which is the source of cooperation. If we want, we can scale up the individual right and independence to family, community, ethnic and country levels. Injustice can easily be perceived, sensed and feel because we see no difference between us as individuals and the community we love. In scaling up process the essence is still the love for own freedom and independence, which is the mother of all kinds of social cooperation.

This habit of behavior and mindset has implication for economic development. Under the current Ethiopian economic situation and the state of the global economy, freedom means the right to specialization and interdependence. Cooperation is needed for interdependence and not for the promotion of individual independence. My view is that we find ourselves at a time in which the Ethiopian society needs organic cooperation and not the usual mechanical cooperation grounded on the tradition of preserving individual independence.

I will try to ground my simple observation on empirical evidence which I analyzed in my research works. My first evidence comes from my current observation on the mechanism of economic progress in Ethiopia. Economic activities are chosen and organized in the Ethiopian society along the lines of two types of living organisms: rural households and firms in urban centers. The rural households are based on the land economy, while firms are based on capital/wage employment economy. I use the term living organism as a reference to underline their capability to response, self preserve, reproduce, grow and self-regulate in the process of resource creation and use in the society.

According to the recent 2012/13 agricultural sample survey of CSA (Central Statistical Agency) of Ethiopia, there are over 15 million agricultural households cultivating 17,5 million hectares of land. According to CSA definition "a household is considered an agricultural household when at least one member of the household is engaged in growing crops and/or raising livestock in private or in combination with others." Be it a one person household or a multi-person household (in fact over 90 percent is a multi person household), the person/s living in the household makes provision for their own living.

In rural Ethiopia households are a self-organizing beings. In my research I defined a household as a group of people who are organized themselves into families to occupy a separate farming and dwelling unit. Rural households are both a consumption and production units. The most important concerns of households is the security of household food supplies and cash needs. I have used different methods to standardize their consumption requirements and to estimate the quantity of resource needs. For example, a household can provide an average of four adult-equivalent labor and needs an average of four hector land to maintain the level of output needed for reproduction (an average of 12,8 quintal per subsistence household per year). The rural households are similar in purposes and live side by side. The question is what happens to their input and output proportional requirements and ratio as the their number increases over time.



As shown in Figure 1 in between 1984 and 2005 the household number increased by an average of 7,8% per year. Annually many new subsistence households are established and in

a matter of one generation the number of agricultural households has more than doubled. The multiplication of the subsistence households increases the consumption requirements and land demand of the households and the number of subsistence labor. As their number and resource needs increases over time, the households intensified their co-operation for existence. The cooperation takes different forms including labor exchange, share cropping and land rent. For detailed empirical study you can down load our village report from <http://people.su.se/~bmalm/Sodo.pdf>.

As the household multiplied economic resources are fragmented and social cooperation is used as a means for peaceful existence of independent and self provisioning households. In cases where social cooperation could not manage the severity of resource scarcity, we observe armed conflicts, internal and international migration.

Experiences of other countries show that as the population growth pressure increases, there should be an increase in division of labor and specialization to introduce technology and increase labor productivity and mass production. What we observe in rural Ethiopia is the reverse: staunch effort to preserve the self provision mechanism and independent existence of the households. The EPDRF government is investing close to 15 billion Birr in this process of fragmentation with hope of changing the tide. What is at the root of all the household, however, is the freedom to be self sufficient (not to be dependent on others and not to be restricted by markets). What the evidence in the last 30 years show is that cooperation, coming from either the village or the state, nurtured the peaceful fragmentation of resources and household multiplications in the country. The household size numbering 15 million did not happen by miracle. Independent minded households received support from villages and governments. Rural household labor does not think what to specialize and how to be interdependent with others (market thinking). They prefer independence against the advantages of market interdependence.

My research experience in studying the habitual behavior of the business people and industrial firms is limited. Last year in Addis Ababa I presented a paper in a seminar and workshop on promoting industrial development in Ethiopia. I discussed about the construction of Special Economic Zones and Clusters and what Ethiopia can learn from Asian and European experiences. In a discussion following my presentation, a person whom claims to have many years of experience in the business sector and who himself is actively working for the promotion of the private sector in Ethiopia dismissed the relevance of cluster idea (geographical concentrations of economic and innovation activities) to Ethiopian conditions.

In my presentation I emphasized internal linkages, whereby cluster gains are furthered by local firm cooperation (joint action), local institutions and local social capital. Contrary to my model, the person underlined the need for industrial firms to work independently without trying to elaborate the advantages of operating in isolation. Since I understand the behavior of suspicion on claims and zero-sum cognition, I did not see any point in challenging his belief. I came to learn that I have to marshal a vast array of empirical evidence to convincingly argue about the advantages clusters in enhancing the individual capacities of small firms to access markets, acquire skills, knowledge, credit and information. I took it for granted that business people know from experience the advantages of connections between firms and institutions.

Political cases on the behavior of working independently or cooperating to work independently can be traced back to the Era of Princes (*Zemene mesafint*). By the beginning of the 19th century territorial aristocrats were dominant both in northern and southern Ethiopia. Kings were puppet in the hands of the territorial princes. For instance, King Tekle Giorgis was dethroned six times in eleven years (1779-84, 1794-95, 1795-96, 1797-99, 1800). The territorial princes, though they were powerful, did not assume the title of King of Kings for practical reasons. Since regions were geographically very much interdependent, any expansion or contraction of a territorial power was at the expense of the neighboring power. Kings had to intervene to restrain and check conflicts among territorial powers. Kings had the ideological, traditional and legal grounds to intervene and restrain the territorial power. The Era of princes was the best political case of cooperation for fragmentation.

Emperor Tewedros, Yohannes and Menelik tried to standardized the system and created institutional interdependence and specialization. Their efforts of modernizing the political and military institution is currently interpreted as regional domination and ethnic subjugation. What is the point of "discovering the ethnic past" at a time when economic processes both at nation and globally level requires specialization and integration to promote technology and create mass production and employment.

The source lies in our habitual behavior to be independent and self reliance against all odds. What has happened to the multiplication of the rural households can happen to other instances. In fact those who advocate Ethiopian unity are also splintered into different political parties and they create forum or alliance (cooperation) to nurture their respective organizational independence. Why? I do not mean that they should merge out of love; but I do not see the parties configuring what to specialize and how to be interdependent program wise.

Common to all Ethiopians including myself is the core habit of appreciating individual independence, no matter the level at which we project the idea. I am wondering why our mind remains static or fixed to this habit of "independence" no matter the costs while socio-economic dynamic shifts overtime requiring new approaches and solutions? Global economy and consequences of population growth in Ethiopia require organic cooperation rather than mechanical cooperation used to nurture territorial/individual independence during the era of princes. In a country where I live (Sweden) administrative and economic actors are working hard to interconnect regions functionally thus making geographical division and administrative boundaries antiquated. Political parties are working on the idea and basis of "class struggle" to create unity among the people and create interdependence between party programs. What is the basis of our concept of freedom and independence? Is this concept fixed or relative changing with time? My view is that in a globalized world functioning on value chains and at a time of massive resource scarcity facing the Ethiopian people, freedom should lead to cooperation, specialization and interdependence.

I have not informally or formally discussed this idea with anyone and I apologize in advance for simplifying such sensitive issue. For comments I can be reached at:

tsegaye.tegenu@epmc.se