Food Systems Governance in Context: Ethiopia

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Executive Summary

Governance determines who has power, who makes decisions, how other players make their voice heard and how account is rendered. Though the institutions that create a governance structure may take many shapes and forms, planners and community development practitioners seeking to work in communities that are rural or isolated from the governing institutions of the state (i.e., the government) must consider the multiple institutions that exert influence and authority over society if they wish to effect meaningful and substantial change. This is especially true in places like Ethiopia, where entire communities can be intensely isolated from the mainstream political processes.

This report examines the concept of governance as applied to food systems in Ethiopia, using the case of two regions in Ethiopia to contextualize the analysis. It draws from scholarly and practitioner literature to formulate a satisfactory understanding of food systems governance that can be used to analyze food systems interventions in the field. Most significantly, I draw from the Institute on Governance’s five principles of good governance, and two meanings of governance defined by van Kersbergen and van Waarden (2004) – self-organization and economic governance.

After a brief overview of food systems, I provide context on some of the governmental and non-governmental institutions at play in Ethiopia. Finally, I utilize Alan Hunt’s six components of food system practice: multi-sector approaches, multi-level approaches, participatory process, interdisciplinary analysis, multi-objective goals, and inclusive orientation. I go through each of the six components to examine how they might play out within the institutional framework of Ethiopia to promote food systems governance overall.

I conclude with a summary and by suggesting that the five principles for governance and the six components of food systems practice might be used together to thoughtfully engage and plan for food systems governance structures in rural Ethiopia.
Introduction

Governance determines who has power, who makes decisions, how other players make their voice heard and how account is rendered.1 Though the institutions that create a governance structure may take many shapes and forms, planners and community development practitioners seeking to work in communities that are rural or isolated from the governing institutions of the state (i.e., the government) must consider the multiple institutions that exert influence and authority over society if they wish to effect meaningful and substantial change.

With this in mind, this report examines the multi-faceted concept of governance and explores several ways to think about how various institutions might contribute to good governance in communities around the world. In particular, this report applies principles and definitions of governance to food systems institutions at local levels in Ethiopia (figure 1).

Governance

The World Bank has formulated a widely-accepted definition for governance at the national level, and has assessed nations based on this definition and a set of “Worldwide Governance Indicators” since 1996. The World Bank’s definition of governance is as follows:

“Governance consists of the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced; the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them.” 2

These indicators, which have served as an important litmus test for the quality of a nation’s governance over the past two decades, include six dimensions:
1) Voice and accountability
2) Political stability and absence of violence
3) Government effectiveness
4) Regulatory quality
5) Rule of law
6) Control of corruption

This definition and the attendant indicators focus much attention on national-level government institutions. While this definition of governance is by no means incorrect, many countries have found it difficult to establish strong governments at local levels. It would therefore be quite difficult to effectively implement local-level planning and development problems in these contexts if government were the only form of governance. Thus, a broader understanding of governance is required.

The literature of development (as well as that of other disciplines) has produced a variety of definitions of governance. Many of these definitions do not consider government structures and institutions as the only entities involved in governance, but instead refer to the broad array of institutions that hold power over people’s lives. In this vein, the Institute on Governance (IoG) suggests that governance is a process that happens at all levels, and with all kinds of organizations: “In principle, the concept of governance may be applied to any form of collective action.”

With this broader understanding of governance in mind, the IoG provides five principles that together may be considered an alternative to the World Bank dimensions, and which are drawn from the United Nations Development Programme’s Declaration of Universal Human Rights of 1948. They include: legitimacy and voice, direction, performance, accountability, and fairness (table 1).

Table 1. Five Principles of Good Governance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governance Principle</th>
<th>UNDP Principles on which Governance Principle is based</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Legitimacy and Voice</td>
<td>Participation, Consensus orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Direction</td>
<td>Strategic vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Performance</td>
<td>Responsiveness, Effectiveness and efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Accountability</td>
<td>Accountability, Transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Fairness</td>
<td>Equity, Rule of Law</td>
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Political scientists Kees van Kersbergen and Franz van Waarden echo the sentiment that governance need not imply the presence of state agencies. They articulate nine meanings of “governance,” two of which will be particularly useful in this analysis: Self-Organization and Economic Governance.
“Self-Organization” (also called “Governance without Government”) refers to “self-organization of societies and communities, beyond the market and short of the state.”x While this is most often used for common pool resources (e.g., fisheries, communal grazing land, etc.), the concept applies more generally to include “bottom-up self-government by associations, informal understandings, negotiations, regulations, trust relations and informal social control rather than state coercion.”xi This definition of governance is especially important given the prominent role that indigenous or other non-state institutions play in many peoples’ lives in rural Ethiopia. Even in contexts where government institutions are relatively strong, the role of self-organization may also be strong in certain sectors.

The second meaning of “governance” articulated by van Kersbergen and van Waarden to consider in relation to food systems governance is “Economic Governance” (also termed “Markets and their Institutions). This meaning of governance assumes that markets are not spontaneous social orders, but must be “created and maintained by institutions.” In the authors’ words:

> “Societies have produced a variety of institutions to govern economic transactions, help reduce their costs and hence increase the likelihood of their occurrence. Governments are only one source of such institutions.”xii

Economic governance requires markets to be accessible, information to be shared, risk to be reduced, and the rules of the game to be enforced. All the institutions that play a role in these and other activities are involved in the “Economic Governance” of a particular area or market. This may include tradesmen, commodity exchanges, cell phone service providers, courts, or negotiations. xiii

What each of these alternative definitions of governance attempt to capture is that governance can exist outside of or alongside government structures, and that government is not synonymous with governance:

> “In other words, ‘governance’ is a broader category than ‘government’. Much of it takes place without direct state involvement, though the shadow of hierarchy may incite private actors...”xiv

This is especially true in Ethiopia, where many of the nation’s people-groups have exerted significant local autonomy until very recent times, and where there is a strong tradition of indigenous and informal institutions. The fact that various institutions and traditions – and not merely the government – have a role in the governance of various aspects of society and at multiple levels is pivotal to this analysis.
Food Security and Food Systems

Food is essential to human life, and the production of food (i.e., agriculture) represents the largest portion of Ethiopia’s economy at about 46% of the GDP and nearly 80% of employment. In 1996, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) adopted a definition of food security at the World Food Summit that is still widely accepted.

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

This definition introduces the four main dimensions of food security frequently used today: physical availability, economic and physical access, utilization, and stability of the other three over time.

When planners think about food, however, they tend to think of the processes, institutions, and organizations in place that create a food system: “the flow of products from production, through processing, distribution, consumption, and the management of wastes, and associated processes.” While food systems and food security are deeply intertwined, they are not the same concept. As will be discussed below, the effective governance of food systems – which in theory should create at least some measure of food security – requires multiple disciplines, including healthcare, nutrition, economics, politics, and others. While this report acknowledges the importance of food security, this report focuses on governance of food systems with an emphasis on food systems institutions and organizations at the local level, with acknowledgment that even the local food system is connected to all levels of society.

Ethiopia in Context

Overview of Ethiopian Context

In terms of geographic context, Ethiopia sits astride the Ethiopian Plateau in the African Horn, and is a largely rugged and mountainous country. Because of the rugged terrain, infrastructure is still largely underdeveloped, and many people-groups and communities are isolated from surrounding communities and from the central state; in fact, it is common especially in the southern part of Ethiopia for people-groups within thirty miles of one another to have entirely different languages and cultures. The nation is also highly rural, with approximately 84% of the population living in rural areas at the time of the most recent census. The combination of these factors creates an environment in which there is likely to be a vacuum of state governance institutions, and is to some extent why the two definitions of governance
emphasized above – self-organization and economic governance – prevail in the lived experiences of many people throughout the country.

**Government Structure of Ethiopia**

A detailed exploration of the structure of the Ethiopian government is beyond the scope of this analysis, but a cursory overview is necessary to understand the institutional context of Ethiopia. Ethiopia is a federal parliamentary republic, with nine ethno-linguistic regions, each of which has “the unrestricted right to self-determination up to secession.” These regions are subdivided into zones. Zones are subdivided into *woredas* (districts), and *woredas* are divided into *kebelles* (peasant association, ward, or neighborhood).

The ministries of the federal government have offices and representatives at each level of government down to the *kebelle* level. Particularly important for this analysis of food systems governance are the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD), the Ministry of Health (MoH), and Ministry of Capacity Building (MoCB). At the *kebelle* level, the primary representatives of these ministries are Development Agents (DAs), Health Extension Workers (HEWs), and *kebelle* managers respectively. The Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED) has also been involved with certain aspects of the food system – particularly with respect to nutrition – at higher levels of government.

Besides the *kebelle* representatives, there are other institutions associated with these ministries at the community level, such as farmer training centers and health posts.

The government of Ethiopia is characterized by a top-down approach, with a strong central government that sets plans and priorities for the nation as a whole. This can be beneficial in terms of the alignment of goals, but may hinder civic engagement, capacity building, and involvement in important governance activities at the local level. One manifestation of this approach was the creation of the National Nutrition Programme (NNP) in 2008 and subsequent years, which lays out “a plan to coordinate between food security, nutrition and health programmes to address malnutrition.” In the Ethiopian context, where malnutrition is high (44% of children under age 5 are stunted), nutrition is an important proxy for the efficacy of the food system. The NNP envisages “institutional arrangements for multisectoral nutrition coordination and linkages,” with the National Nutrition Coordination Body having ultimate authority over decision-making and policy. This institutional arrangement necessitates that – in order to work in the country – all of the ministries of the government of Ethiopia, private sector
actors, academia, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) ultimately must fit their nutrition- and food-oriented programs within the NNP framework.

Indigenous Institutions

As alluded to previously, there are many local institutions that have traditionally existed in Ethiopia that provide social services and build social capital within a community. With respect to indigenous social institutions in general, Nigatu Regassa, an Ethiopian researcher with the Drylands Coordination Group, notes the following:

*Indigenous social institutions are established to provide diverse services for members and other beneficiaries around the community. They play economic, social, political and other roles (natural resource management, participation in production processes etc.)*

In the various Ethiopian cultures, there are many institutions that are specific to a particular culture. However, there are also several indigenous institutions that are common in most Ethiopian cultures. These include the *idder*, *iqub*, women’s associations, and other institutions. The following are brief overviews of these three indigenous institutions to provide examples of how these institutions function. These institutions will also be used in later analysis.

Idder: The *idder* is a social organization that is organized at the grassroots level in rural and urban communities throughout Ethiopia, and functions as something of a life insurance policy. An *idder* may be composed of people who have relationships through kinship, geography, religion, gender, or profession. A person or household may be a member in multiple *idders*, and membership tends to be relatively stable and long-term. When a member of an *idder* passes away, his or her family members will receive funds from the *idder* and from other networks to help pay for funeral expenses. Though payments for funerals are the primary purpose of the *idder*, they also exist as credit organizations in some parts of Ethiopia.

Iqub: As with the *idder*, the *iqub* functions in slightly different ways depending on the specific context. However, the typical way that it functions is that members of the *iqub* contribute to a communal pool of money. This money is allocated to its members either by lottery or in a specified order. The “winner” may then use the money as seed money for farm equipment, investment, or however he or she sees fit.

Women’s Associations: Women’s associations are not as diffuse as *idder* and *iqub*, but one of the most prominent of these is the Women’s Association of Tigray (WAT). WAT was established in 1995 and has
implemented a wide range of activities focused on women’s empowerment, including “lobbying and advocating to increase women’s participation, providing skill development training and capital for poor women.”

Application: Food Systems Governance in Ethiopia

Having established a definition of governance that is suitable for our purposes, and having provided the context for several of the institutions at work in Ethiopia, this final section seeks to explore how a planner or development practitioner might approach food systems governance in Ethiopia. To do this, I utilize six principles of food systems practice outlined by Hunt. These principles of food systems practice describe the characteristics of successful and sustainable food systems policies, actions, or interventions. These characteristics of food systems practice are: multi-sector, multi-level, participatory process, interdisciplinary analysis, multi-objective goals, and inclusive orientation.

As a food system project is implemented according to these six components, there are implications for food systems governance (i.e., if a food system intervention is multi-sectoral in its approach, the governance structure should also represent multiple sectors). Thus, this section seeks to address what elements of food systems governance should be considered for each component of food systems practice in the context of Ethiopia.

Multi-Sector Approach

As has been emphasized throughout this paper, the governance of local food systems cannot be addressed by a single sector. In Ethiopia, the private sector remains relatively weak, so the public sector (i.e., government agencies) tends to exercise considerable control over many areas of society, including the food system. While this may be least true at the local level where government actors are less diffuse in society, even in the most remote corners of the country the government still retains some level of influence. At the local level of food systems governance in Ethiopia, private sector actors may include households, processing facilities, cooperatives, and shops; the public sector may include local branches of the federal ministries; and the non-profit or civil-service sector may include indigenous institutions, educational institutions, women’s associations, and NGOs. Effective food systems governance should draw from each of these sectors, furthering the five principles of governance promoted by the IoG (legitimacy and voice, direction, performance, accountability, and fairness). Indeed, the very process of engaging diverse sectors at the local level promotes these principles.
Multi-Level Approach

While this analysis focuses on local food systems governance, the food system is indeed a product of multiple levels of society, especially in the hierarchical environment of Ethiopian government and culture. Food system interventions must engage the food system at multiple levels if they are to be effective. This applies to the governmental as well as non-governmental institutions, such as markets from the village-level to the international-level. It should also be emphasized that the various levels of governance are fluid, and often have “rippling” or overlapping effects on one another.

Local institutions that affect food systems governance include cultural ideals of communal and household roles, cooperatives, the local indigenous community institutions that act as insurance and lending organizations, and local government posts. With the exclusion of the government posts, this local level food systems governance often falls under the “Self-Organization” definition of governance described above, where people create markets, relationships, and trust to make things happen. Economic governance also happens at this level in Ethiopia, but it is largely informal and is heavily influenced by institutions at higher levels of governance. Examples of mid-level institutions that are part of the food systems governance framework might include large urban markets; supermarkets and their ancillary institutions; woreda and regional bureaus and their policies; and ethnic or cultural food preferences. The highest levels of institutions include national and international trade organizations; national policies (such as the NNP mentioned above); international aid agencies; and religious institutions, such as the Orthodox Church and Islam, which both prescribe fasting of various foods throughout the year. Though economic governance as defined above occurs at all levels, it can be especially powerful at the mid- and high-level of institutions, where decision made by market institutions can shape the viability of smallholder farms throughout the nation.

Participatory Process

In order for governance to fulfill the five principles of governance articulated by the IoG, it is essential for stakeholders at all levels to participate in decision-making processes. Participation may look different in different governance contexts (i.e., voting in an election, building a communal dam, or contributing to an idder), but in bringing about legitimacy and voice, accountability, and fairness, it is important for these processes to be participatory. Especially at local levels where food systems governance may be carried out by informal institutions, participatory processes in food systems governance are likely to facilitate the self-organization aspect of governance, where informal understandings, negotiations, trust relations, and social control dominate. In terms of economic
governance, cooperatives and farmer groups attempt to increase the participation of producers in the market. In Ethiopia, participatory processes are often difficult to achieve because of the top-down orientation of government priorities noted above. However, the decentralized nature of many of the government bureaus may paradoxically help mitigate this effect, allowing for community members to be involved in government decision-making at the local level. Ostensibly, this is the role of the kebelle manager – to ensure that all voices are heard and all concerns are addressed, and to add another accountability mechanism, which contributes to good governance principles.xxxvi

**Interdisciplinary Analysis**

The food system is an entity that encompasses a wide array of activities, including the production, processing, trade, allocation, and consumption of food. As such, it should be examined from the disciplines of nutrition, agriculture, economics, politics, environmental science, as well as others. At the local level in Ethiopia, this means that food systems governance should include and be evaluated by health extension workers, development agents, microfinance institutions, kebelle managers, and labor. Academic perspectives from each of the above-mentioned disciplines should be included as well, as well as food systems practitioners, which may include NGOs or private sector actors. This touches on the accountability and performance principles of governance, since analysis using only one discipline would be incomplete and only marginally helpful.

**Multi-Objective Goals**

That food systems should have multi-objective goals goes hand-in-hand with the previous principle of interdisciplinary analysis, though multi-objective goals refers primarily to the objectives and outworkings of the food system and not the evaluation of it. A food system should engage various disciplines to achieve multiple goals in multiple sectors if it is to achieve high levels of efficacy and a broad reach of influence. Food systems should neither be designed to achieve only one goal, nor should be they be framed as such in the course of advocacy or promotion. As long as single-issue advocacy in food systems governance prevails, certain stakeholders will be left out. This inhibits the fairness principle from being played out in a governance structure, as well as the legitimacy and voice principle. In Ethiopia, this component of food systems governance can be enhanced by the interaction and communication of different stakeholders at local levels, such as DAs, HEWs, women’s associations, and other community groups.
Inclusive Orientation

The inclusive orientation component of a food system is directly related to the governance principle of fairness – does the food system equitably serve and allow for participation of all constituents? As inclusivity increases, a greater diversity of perspectives is likely to be included in the decision-making process. This supports nearly all of the other food system components discussed above. This also leads to empowerment of traditionally marginalized groups. In Ethiopia, this can lead to greater voice and empowerment for women in the food system.

Conclusion

This report has introduced the traditional concept of governance promoted by the World Bank, and has expanded it to move the focus away from government structures using van Kersbergen and van Waarden’s definitions of Self Organization and Economic Governance. This report also has utilized the five principles of governance promoted by the Institute on Governance to establish a sense of what good governance looks like outside of the government-oriented framework provided by the World Bank.

I then briefly explored food systems as conceived of in planning literature, using that to inform our understanding of food systems governance in the rest of the report. After this, I explored the prominent institutions at play at local levels in Ethiopia, acknowledging that communities are also affected by institutions outside of their control at national and international levels. These institutions include formal institutions of the state, as well as informal and indigenous institutions.

Finally, using the concepts and context above, I utilized Hunt’s six components of food systems governance to examine how the governance of food systems might function in Ethiopian communities.

These six components of food systems practice, along with the five principles of governance and a broad understanding of governance can be utilized in the Ethiopian context to help better understand how food systems governance must be shaped if it is to be effective. This report has provided generalized examples of what such governance structures might look like, but the principles may be applied to specific projects, policies, or other interventions to help assess the extent to which that intervention facilitated good governance.
Works Cited

ii Ibid.

xii Ibid., 146
xiii Ibid., 146
xiv Ibid., 146


Ibid.

Ibid.


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Ibid.

