State, civil society & expanding SSE among informal sector women in Ethiopia

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Overview

- Informal sector organizing under SACCOs/potential for SSE expansion

- Conceptualization under circumscribed vision of women’s empowerment

- CSP law main nexus of contradiction

- NGOs ineffective catalysts of change
3 Main critiques

- Autonomy
- Ideology
- Alienation

Objective: critique SACCO approach in context of an antagonistic state
Gender, poverty & the neoliberal state

• Post-1991 neoliberal turn under EPRDF
• IMF/WB emphasis on a new kind of state – *to ensure conditions for people to act socially in market-conforming fashion*
• Extra economic concerns – social engineering
• Reduced public spending
• Massive structural/urban poverty
• 61% informal sector in Addis
• Feminist readings
Labour appropriation

- Informal sector & capitalist labour generation
- SSE a constitutive response under neoliberalism
- Solidarity economies in resistance BUT
- SHGs source of contradiction – autonomy vs. institutionalist logic (law)
- Recall critiques of micro-lending
State feminism

• State feminism obstacle to SSE – NGO mediation and legitimization
• State access through women’s machinery
• EPRDF/TPLF de-politicization & de-radicalization of woman question
• Formal cooptation & discourse of ‘protection’
• Negation of exploitation, incoherent and contradictory state actions towards informal sector
• Super-exploitation & restricted accumulation from below
Dynamics of SACCO organizing

- Range of informal sector work
- Sociological, psychological & economic role of SHGs
- Structure/functions:
  - Federation (11 CLAs)
  - Cluster Level Association (6 – 8 SHGs)
  - Self-Help Group (15 – 20 members)
Observations

- Modeling & limitations
- Autonomy/state suppression of CSOs
- Interrogate recuperation of historically unpopular SACCOs:
  - Imperial regime (1960-74) – smallholder agric.
  - Military regime (1974-92) – socialist economy
- Retreat of state & modified nature of coops
- Reactionary state response – CSP law
Charities & Societies Proclamation law No. 00/2008 (CSP law)

- Strict, unregulated criminal & admin penalties
- Criminalizes human rights activities
- Funding restrictions
- Outlaws campaigning for gender equality, children’s rights, disabled persons rights
- Disproportionate penalties for minor breaches
- CSA with broad discretionary power over CSOs
- Government surveillance, interference in CSO work
Barriers:

- Funding restrictions – Reconstitution and refocusing of NGO work;
- Liberal-capitalist focus on ‘empowerment’;
- From donor-dependence to private sector-dependence;
- Silencing of dissidence/weakened solidarity bases;
- Discursive shift from language of ‘rights’ assumes ethical questions settled
Conclusion

- *Autonomy* thus critical – desirable proximity undermined under CSP

- Challenge to “territoriality/localism/subsidiarity”

- SSE under such estrangement of gendered poverty from its structural base?

- Alternative paths to subsistence/life-centered political economies?