

# research evidence for policy



First-grade khat at Aweday market, East Harerge (March 2008). Photo: Ephrem Tesema

## Khat in Ethiopia: finding a balance between positives and negatives



Case studies featured here were conducted in Ethiopia.

### Policy message

- Khat is a controversial crop: it is important economically, but because it is a mild narcotic, it has numerous disadvantages.
- Because of the controversy surrounding its production and use, khat has been neglected by agricultural research and extension services.
- Open, constructive debate about khat should involve all stakeholders in the sector to design policies that maximise the benefits and mitigate the disadvantages of the crop.
- Such a debate must be informed by multidisciplinary research to provide reliable information about the crop, its production, trade, and use.

- Khat (*Catha edulis*) is a controversial crop. When chewed, the leaves are mildly narcotic, causing it to be banned in North America and much of Europe. In Ethiopia, Somalia, and Yemen, where most khat is grown, the crop is not illegal, and it provides the basis for a growing part of the economy.

- Over the past few decades, discussions about khat in Ethiopia have alternated between people who want to make khat illegal and those who oppose this. Most such arguments are based on ideology and politics rather than science. Arguments about the harmful and beneficial effects of khat have diverted attention from the potential for research on the crop, including its alternative uses. This issue of *evidence for policy*, based on three years of multi-site field research, outlines the positive and negative effects of khat, and proposes ways to engage in a more constructive discussion.

### The positive side of khat

- Khat generates a large amount of income for Ethiopia's farmers, and over the last decade it has emerged as one of the country's five leading agricultural exports. Along with the rising number of domestic consumers, this stimulates growers to increase production using new technologies, expand their plots, tap surface and ground water, and improve harvesting and packing techniques.

Research by Tesema (2011) has revealed that for centuries before it became a widespread cash crop, monastic communities, forest dwellers, Muslim communities, and indigenous healers kept khat. They used it for various purposes: for healing, for barter, as currency, for gifts, to pay tax, and to circulate during rituals.

In urban centres, various types of khat-chewing establishments have emerged to serve different categories of consumers. In most cities and

## Featured case study

Khat value chains were investigated in Ethiopia spanning three regional states, five districts, three regional night markets, and several major retailing and consumption centres in urban areas. Data were collected via participant observation, case study and document analysis, and interviews. The researcher traced the flow of khat as a commodity by analysing competing actors involved in the process. The research covered leading khat-production regions, including Oromiya and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional States, as well as Amhara region which has just begun producing for national markets. Regional khat markets such as Aweday in Oromiya, Tefera-Basha in the South, and Zenzelima in Amhara region play key roles in adding value to the commodity before it is transported to consumption centres within and outside Ethiopia (Tesema 2011).

- towns, the crop has created
- employment opportunities for people
- directly involved in the khat business
- as well as for those who rent houses
- or sell cigarettes, coffee, tea, and
- peanuts (which often accompany
- chewing sessions), as well as lottery
- tickets.

### Causes for concern

- Despite khat's contribution to the
- Ethiopian economy in the form of
- employment and taxes, many are
- alarmed by the rising use of land and
- water and the temptation for farmers
- to plant it instead of other crops.
- Other concerns include its long-term
- impact on public health, the non-
- productive time that consumers
- spend chewing, and the amount of
- money that individuals spend on khat
- to the detriment of their family's
- well-being.

- The following issues emerged from a
- three-year study in various towns,
- cities, and regional khat markets in
- Ethiopia:

### Inconsistent policies of government and law

- **enforcement.** Regional
- governments, municipal officials, and
- law enforcement agencies have
- conflicting policies on khat
- production, trade, and consumption.
- In Amhara Regional State, khat trade
- is officially excluded from taxation
- and khat farmers are denied
- compensation when the regional
- government appropriates their land
- for other development purposes; local
- media outlets support this by
- spreading unverified information
- about khat, based on inadequate
- research. In Oromiya, by contrast,
- particularly places like Aweday and
- Haramaya, farmers are able to
- negotiate for compensation when
- their khat trees are removed to make
- way for expansion of neighbouring
- towns.

- In some quarters of Addis Abeba city,
- law enforcement officials have shut
- down khat-chewing establishments;
- while in other quarters of the city,
- khat chewing is permitted in retail
- establishments and large private
- villas. Indeed, laws on the sale and

consumption of khat are inconsistently applied, particularly in urban areas. These inconsistent policies sow confusion, harming growers, traders, consumers, and owners of khat-chewing establishments.

### Communal water resources.

Lakes, rivers, and streams are mismanaged and subject to competition among khat growers. Current questions being discussed include:

- Has khat encouraged the tilling of most of the shores of Lake Tana?
- Did khat contribute to the drying up of Lake Haramaya, near Harar in eastern Ethiopia, and streams feeding Lake Tana and the Abay River in the northwest?
- Has khat stimulated the growth of settlements and khat farms around the sources of perennial streams on hilltops and ridges, for example in Melaga wereda in Sidama Zone, south-central Ethiopia?

**Pesticides.** Another debate revolves around the health impact of pesticides applied to khat as well as the illicit trade and use of pesticides on khat farms, and the lack of controls on such chemicals.

**Displacement of food crops.** Khat is replacing staple food crops such as teff in north-western Ethiopia and ensete in the south-central highlands, as well as perennial crops such as coffee. This mainly threatens to reduce community and national food security.

**Trade.** Farming communities and small-scale traders are dominated by a few khat-trading cartels. These cartels control some trade routes to such an extent that they are almost a monopoly. Communities and different groups in neighbouring regional states quarrel over khat taxes; and corruption exists at checkpoints to levy tax on khat along major routes: officials have been accused of gaining illegally from khat traders and transporters.

**Effect on women.** Men, rather than women, keep most of the money earned from selling khat, and they often mismanage the cash. If they use it to pay for sex, they risk spreading HIV to their partners.

**Effect on children.** Some children drop out of school, mainly in the south-central highlands, and take up employment as labourers on khat farms and in regional markets.

**Khat-chewing establishments.** Khat establishments may contribute to the spread of illicit drugs and commercial sex. They may be where criminal activities are planned. Establishments near schools damage the well-being of society at large because they lure teenagers.

**Abuse or excessive use of khat.** This can lead to family members spending large amounts of time chewing, so harming their work, family relationships, and finances. Abuse by certain social groups (including boys, the underemployed, and people with mental illness) is of particular concern.

**Urban environment.** Garaba (the residue from chewing) litters streets and clogs sewers.

### Controversy leads to neglect

Because of the controversy surrounding khat, it has been excluded from agricultural extension and research support over the years. As a result, growers have developed their own cultivation techniques. They divert inputs, equipment, and labour from other crops to boost their khat production. Research and extension services lack knowledge about the crop, including its impact on water resources, land coverage, and its effects on other crops and food security.

### Enhancing positives, reducing negatives

Khat is an unusual global commodity. It is valuable only when fresh, so requires a rapid, efficient distribution system. Most is produced by small-scale farmers in Africa, and the trade and distribution is controlled mainly by people from the producing and consuming countries. International companies have little involvement in this value chain. Governments have little say in price regulation, and there is very little

agricultural research and extension on the crop.

According to one trader interviewed, the major actors in the khat sector wish to have a forum where they can voice their opinions. They regard khat as simply a harmless crop, and do not understand why some individuals and groups see it otherwise.



A farmer standing next to an old khat tree, Zeghe peninsula, northwestern Ethiopia. Photo: Ephrem Tesema



A farmer digging out compost to transport on a donkey to his khat farm, East Harerge, Ethiopia. Photo: Ephrem Tesema

### Definitions

- **Khat:** *Catha edulis*, called *chatt* in Amharic, *jimaa* in Oromifaa, and *qat* in Yemeni Arabic. A shrub or small tree with evergreen leaves native to the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The fresh leaves are chewed and have a mildly narcotic effect.
- **Garaba:** The residue of khat after the tender leaves are chewed. It is used to make compost, as fodder for goats, and as fuel in different parts of Ethiopia.



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## Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

How is it possible to capitalise on the positive aspects of khat, while mitigating its negative features? Requirements include:

- Forums where stakeholders at different levels can discuss issues related to khat in a participatory, constructive, and transparent way, and can seek solutions to problems.
- Close cooperation between state and non-state actors to solve problems related to khat, as well as to identify its social, economic, and scientific benefits (use in pharmaceuticals, as fertiliser or compost, in food and beverages, etc.).
- Multidisciplinary research on khat to understand the interests of actors involved, provide a firm information base for discussions, identify the possible impacts of khat on economic development and public health, and allow actions to be proposed based on scientific evidence.
- Political will is necessary to create a conducive environment for such initiatives.

These requirements necessitate a balanced approach involving a broad range of stakeholders: national, regional, and municipal government officials; legislative agencies, public health, and agricultural authorities, monasteries (the traditional keepers of the plant in Ethiopia), indigenous medical practitioners, research organisations, innovative individuals, farmers, traders, and consumers.

Research is particularly important. The lack of credible information has fostered “sensational” information spread by the media and anti-khat activists. This harms the millions of growers, traders, consumers, and governments who benefit from the khat sector.

### Further reading

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The NCCR North-South is a worldwide research network including six partner institutions in Switzerland and some 140 universities, research institutions and development organisations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. Approximately 350 researchers worldwide contribute to the activities of the NCCR North-South.

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### evidence for policy

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