



10-10-2017

A Thirsty Third World: How Land Grabs Are Leaving Ethiopia in the Dust

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Keywords

Ethiopia, water, land grabs

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Ethiopia is sometimes referred to as the “water tower” of East Africa because it is home to the headwaters of 14 major rivers (BBC, 2004). However, unpredictable rainfall and a lack of reserves have resulted in the country’s heavy dependence on food aid and occurrence of chronic famine (Woodhouse and Ganho, 2011). Ethiopia faces severe issues with access to water, due to a lack of infrastructure and irrigation. Proper access to water affects health, education, food security, personal security, productivity, and empowerment. This makes water management policy especially vital, particularly in times of scarcity.

Over 40 million Ethiopians, roughly half of the total population of 82 million, live without access to safe water (charity: water, 2009). Although there is a huge untapped physical supply of water available for irrigation for crops, only 300,000 hectares are currently being irrigated (HDR, 2006). The current lack of adequate provisions for water makes it difficult to impose meaningful development. In terms of economic development alone, a 2006 UN Human Development Report stated that for Ethiopia, a single drought event in any given twelve-year period lowered the GDP by 7-10% and increased poverty by 12-14% (HDR, 2006). Ethiopia has experienced two droughts in the last 10 years (Bhalla, 2000; Gettleman, 2011) and has faced, 15 droughts since 1965 (Horne, 2011).

Policies and technologies exist that could “double yields over the next 10–15 years,” making any famine a matter of negligence rather than natural disaster (HDR, 2006). However, the government of Ethiopia continues to pursue policies that promote foreign investment in land, despite historical evidence that such

investments have proven to be detrimental to water security and sanitation. It is suspected that runoff from commercial farms that use pesticides will lead to the contamination and reduction of available water supplies (Horne, 2011). “Dams, hydroelectric facilities, irrigation schemes, uncontrolled commercial land investment (and associated deforestation and wetland alteration), local uses, and a changing climate are just some of the pressures on water resources in the Western part of the country” (Oakland Institute, 2011(a)). The Oakland Institute’s field research on a site owned by Karuturi Global¹ in the Gambella region, has discovered that some key wetland areas are being at least partially drained for agricultural use (Horne, 2011).

Global Context of Land Deals

Land deals and their impact on water are the subject of much debate, research, and scrutiny. Several factors are thought to have contributed to the worldwide surge in land investment over the past seven years. For instance, global food prices in 2008 were especially high, which hurt countries that rely on a large amount of imported food. During this time, many of these same countries imposed export bans on key food crops. In 2007 and early 2008, oil prices rose, making all imports and exports more expensive, and prompting governments to call for alternative fuel sources to alleviate their countries’ reliance on oil and gas (Smaller and Mann, 2009). European countries imposed agrofuel deadlines, which are now fast approaching. The profitability of growing crops that produce agrofuels has increased investors’ demand for land². Countries and investors saw

¹ An Indian floriculture company

² However, recently the EU has voted to limit the amount of

agrofuels as an opportunity to prevent food price instability and insecurity. Finally, the financial crisis of 2008 sent investors looking for new markets outside of the banking and housing sector. Agricultural land markets made attractive investments because demand for food and agrofuels is expected to grow (Smaller and Mann, 2009).

Because of the connection between land deals and agricultural issues, many scholars posit that water is actually the underlying motivation of land grabs (Woodhouse and Ganho, 2011; Kay and Franco, 2012; Skinner and Cotula, 2011; PBS, 2012; Oakland Institute (b), 2011; Provost, 2012). The lack of regulation on water and poor overall environmental regulation and enforcement are thought to attract investors (World Bank, 2011; Fisher, 2011; Kay and Franco, 2011). In fact, some agricultural investors explicitly state that they are investing in water supplies (Oakland Institute, 2011 (b)). Yet, as many studies point out, there are no safeguards for local populations to ensure the safety of their water sources, food security, or right to land. These agriculture investments are usually connected with a large increase in water use, making safeguards for this resource all the more necessary (Fisher, 2011; Meyers, 2012). Ethiopia's policy of unrestricted access to water has been a key factor for attracting land investors and has resulted in investors' "cavalier attitudes" towards water management, with a demonstrable lack of interest in conservation practices (Kay and Franco, 2011).

Dual Issues: Land and Water

In addition to the negative impact on water supply and quality, land grabs hurt indigenous populations, which have no legal protection of their ancestral land rights. Critics of land investment argue that such practice will impact future development by relocating and displacing indigenous populations (often to less fertile land), increasing food and water insecurity, and directly endangering Ethiopia's natural resources (Human Rights Watch, 2014 (a)).

agrofuels used for the 2020 renewable energy targets (European Commission, 2015).

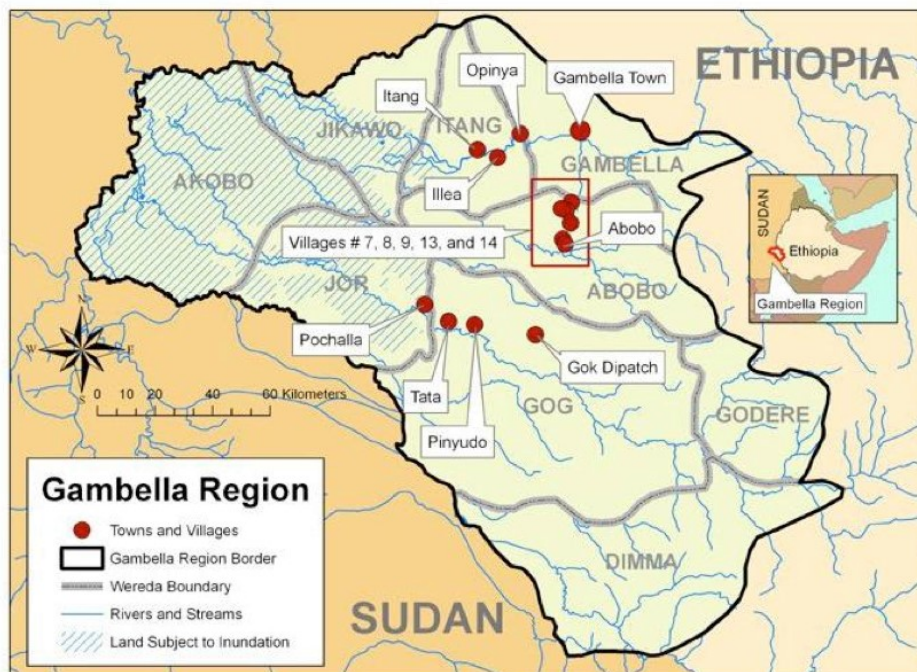
This introduces a transactional system that commodifies land in a country where residents with the most desirable land lack formal land rights, such as the right to sell or lease their property; and does not seek to quantify the monetary value of water usage. This creates a "Tragedy of the Commons" scenario, wherein an unregulated use of water is in investors' best interest: there is no limit or regulation on the resource. It is also important to note that the dominant agrofuels grown by investors in Ethiopia - sugarcane, maize, and jatropha³ - are all especially "thirsty plants" (Oakland Institute, 2011 (b), IBTimes, 2013).

Major Players

Rather than finding solutions to the lack of the water in their own countries, investors are coming to Ethiopia because land leasing is cheap, at around \$1 per hectare per year, making it an attractive alternative. The main investors in Ethiopian farmland come from Saudi Arabia and India; countries that are experiencing, or expect to experience, water shortages. India is quickly depleting its underground water supply, and Saudi Arabia, once a net exporter of wheat, has stated its intention to taper off domestic wheat production by 2016 due to the depletion of their fresh water reserves (Fisher, 2011; Kay and Franco, 2012). Saudi Arabia is "securing the equivalent of hundreds of millions of gallons of scarce water a year" by investing in Africa (Fisher, 2011).

The main Indian investors and agricultural companies include Karuturi Global, Saudi Star, Ruchi Soya, BHO Agro, Sonmati Agro Farm Enterprise, and the Confederation of Potato Seed Farmers (Makki and Geisler, 2011). Saudi Star was registered as one of the biggest commercial farms in Ethiopia even before it went on to buy an additional 4,000 ha from the government. Mohammed Ali Al Amoudi (the Saudi/Ethiopian owner of Saudi Star) also owns Horizon, Ethio Agri-CEFT Plc, each of which has also acquired farms in Ethiopia and land from Ethiopia's Privatization & Public Enterprises Supervising

³ Jatropha is a hardy crop valued for its use as a biofuel, as well as for basket weaving, soap, and candles. Jatropha can also be used as fish or animal feed, but must be detoxified first.



Map Source Data: International Human Rights Clinic, Harvard Law School Human Rights Program (GPS location of towns and villages); Human Rights Watch; "Administrative Weredas of Gambella Region, Ethiopia," UNDP-CUC (1998); Vector Map Level 0 (Digital Chart of the World) Edition 5 (Sept. 2000), US National Imagery and Mapping Agency.

Map Source Data: Anyuak Media. 2008

Agency (PPESA) (Tadesse, 2014). Karuturi Global envisioned an agri-eco zone with sugar factories, oil processing plants, and rice mills in Ethiopia, and signed a 50-year lease for 300,000 ha for \$245 per week (Bose and Mehra, 2012).

Areas and Peoples Affected

Ethiopia has a poor track record with human rights organizations (Horne, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2014 (b)). The Gambella region, in the southwestern part of the country bordering South Sudan, is particularly fraught with controversy and horrific human rights abuses against tribes such as the Anuak. This is believed to be due, in part, to the strategic location of the Anuak's traditional lands (Human Rights Watch, 2012). The Gambella region encompasses several rivers and is rich with water resources. A comparison of land deals to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) data of suitable land for agriculture shows this to be true (Cotula, 2009).

As such, the Gambella region is at the center of land leasing debates. All of the major investing companies in Ethiopia, excluding Sonnat, have land in "water rich" Gambella, amounting to

over 200 investors in the region (Makki and Geisler, 2011). Over the past ten years Gambella has gone from zero land investments to nearly 900 investors in the region (Vidal, 2011). More than 40% of Gambella's land has been leased, or has been indicated as available for leasing. Much larger regions that are also fertile, such as the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region or SNNPR (one of the 9 ethnic divisions of Ethiopia), encompass over 11 million hectares of land. However, only 2% of this total landmass, or 180,625 hectares, has been made available to the Federal Land Bank.

Surprisingly, in Ethiopia's investment promotion agency, all land that is listed as available has been formally classified as "wasteland" with "no pre-existing users" (Cotula, 2009). However, there is ample evidence that at least some of the land allocated to investors was previously, or is currently, used for shifting cultivation and grazing⁴ by indigenous populations. In Gambella, there are numerous confirmed small settlements of Anuak and Nuer indigenous populations, ranging from a few scattered households to villages of up to 1,000 people (Horne, 2011). Their land is labeled 'available,' 'idle,' or 'wasteland' in order to justify allocations to investors (Cotula, 2009). This is alarming because Gambella is physically the smallest region, with the largest portion of land offered for investment.

There is also a history of violence against citizens in the Gambella region. A 2005 Human Rights Watch report highlights attacks that occurred on December 13, 2003 when military and highlander militia groups killed 424 Anuaks in Gambellatown, Abodotown, and surrounding areas over the course of several days (HRW, 2005). "Many more were imprisoned, tortured,

⁴ Shifting cultivation and grazing is an agricultural system in which plots of land are cultivated or used to graze animal herds for a time, then abandoned and allowed to go fallow while the farmer moves on to another plot. The farmer returns after the land has had an appropriate time to regenerate nutrients.

beaten, and 8,000 to 10,000 fled the area to neighboring Sudan” (Horne, 2011). This massacre was in response to an attack by the Anuak on a government vehicle. The military continued this campaign of violence throughout 2004 against Anuak communities, which “amounted to crimes against humanity” (HRW, 2012). In January 2004, international NGO Genocide Watch placed the Anuak’s massacre on its emergency list of ongoing genocides in the world. Dr. Gregory Stanton, president of Genocide Watch, has said “the situation reminds me of Rwanda in 1993, when all the early warning signs were evident but no one paid attention” (McGill, 2004). This massacre was not an isolated incident, but part of an ongoing trend of violence against the Anuak, including an attack by the government in 2012 that resulted in the deaths of both civilians and police officers. In 2005, UNICEF conducted a survey of women and children in Gambella. The report found that women and children specifically experience extreme vulnerability in terms of access to potable water, firewood, transportation to markets, livable wages, education and medical care due to a lack of security (UNICEF, 2005). Furthermore, the report found that these issues of protection and security stemmed from the heavy Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) presence and their actions to “target the civilian population often- but not always- in collaboration with Regional authorities, as well as the targeting of civilians by paramilitary rebel groups” (UNICEF, 2005). The UNICEF concluded by adding:

“Failing urgent action in Gambella region, UNICEF fears a further downward spiraling of violence and suffering heaped on the shoulders of the women and children of Gambella. The deracination of indigenous people that is evident in rural areas of Gambella is extreme. It is very likely that Anuak (and possibly other indigenous minorities) culture will completely disappear in the not-so-distant future. Cultural survival, autonomy, rights of self-determination and self-governance are all legitimate issues

for these indigenous groups, and these are all enshrined by international covenants and United Nations bodies—but all are meaningless in Gambella today” (UNICEF, 2006).

In the last few years, the federal government of Ethiopia has also begun to employ a method of relocation, known as villagization or “commune program,” in the country, with 43 new sites in Gambella alone. The claim is that those relocated will have better access to improved livelihood “within the framework of national Growth and Development Plan” with goals of providing “efficient and effective economic and social services such as (safe drinking water, optimum Health care, Education, improved agronomy practices, market access, etc.), an access to infrastructure (road, power, telecommunication, etc.) and citizens’ full engagement in good governance and democratic exercise” (HRW, 2012).

The notoriously unsteady relationship between indigenous populations and the government, coupled with current abuses being reported by major human rights organizations, make this program a cause for concern.

Villagization

The Ethiopian federal government stated plans to move 1.5 million people from rural areas to areas of denser population from 2011 to 2013 under the villagization program (HRW, 2012; Johnson, 2012). The idea behind this plan is that more densely populated areas will be able to sustain and provide enhanced service delivery. While the government claims there is no relationship between land investment and villagization, these forced relocations occur in the same areas as commercial land investments (Horne, 2011). Additionally, most individuals being moved are not experiencing a higher quality of life, and are often suffering as a result. Felix Horne, an Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch, notes, “There is a definite correlation between the areas undergoing relocation and the areas that are marketed as available for large-scale commercial agriculture” (Horne, 2011).

Land grants that have been offered to the Tigray (an ethnic group inhabiting the southern and central parts of Eritrea and the northern highlands of Ethiopia's Tigray Region) and other urban elites who offer support for the government reinforces this viewpoint. In addition, some members of the government reportedly invest in some of the companies that engage in land grabs. It is possible that the government is promoting investment in these locations in the hope that it will further marginalize and disempower indigenous people. The Anuak and Nuer people are seen as non-natives of Ethiopia having settled there approximately 200-300 years ago. This policy of villagization allows the government to have increased control in the area while weakening the infrastructure and support system of the Anuak and Nuer (Horne, 2011).

Human Rights Watch furthers the notion that "unused" is a pretext for displacement by highlighting the villagization program, and specifically the human rights abuses, in Gambella. Tens of thousands of people in the Gambella region have already been displaced (HRW, 2012). Although the Ethiopian government denies any connection between land investment and villagization, many who have been displaced under villagization told Human Rights Watch that government officials claimed this was the underlying reason for their displacement.

"Residents of six communities told Human Rights Watch that government officials informed them that the underlying reason for villagization is to provide land to investors. One farmer said that during the government's initial meeting with his village, woreda officials told them: 'We will invite investors who will grow cash crops. You do not use the land well. It is lying idle'" (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

Government Involvement and Policies

An in-house investment presentation by Karuturi Global revealed that, "in order to maintain growth and [reduce] urban poverty, it [the Ethiopian government] has allowed many

Global Private Sector enterprises to operate in Ethiopia with a very minor stake in the company" (Karuturi Presentation, 2012). Although evidence is not currently available on whether or not the government has asked to have a minor stake in each company, it may help explain why Ethiopia is offering their land for such low rents. If the Ethiopian government retains a share in each investment, land deals are more attractive despite the small revenue from land rents (further reduced by tax incentives at every level) and meager job creation for Ethiopian citizens. More research and analysis is essential in order to understand the underlying motivations for these land deals and to better comprehend the path of Ethiopia's development.

Where We Stand Now

In the decade from 1999 to 2009, the Ethiopian government leased 3.5 million hectares of agricultural land to investors. From 2009 to 2015, the Growth & Transformation Plan (GTP) states intentions to transfer 3.3 million more hectares of land to investors for mechanized commercial farms (Tadesse, 2014).

The Oakland Institute points to the risks of encouraging land investment: there are no incentives to guarantee food production that will meet local needs, no research into whether or not investors are experienced in agriculture, no data on the feasibility of the promise of these agricultural plans, and no assurance of job creation for local people (Horne, 2011). However, the greatest concern is for the immediate impacts on life for Ethiopians from land grabs, villagization, and water projects including the impact on women, the next generation, and the environment.

The Impact on Women

The lack of potable water particularly affects women and girls, robbing them of their health, time, and dignity (Lenton, Wright, Lewis, 2005). It is apparent that women spend much of their time (or at least a significantly larger portion of their time as compared to men) doing unpaid labor, such as fetching water or fuel (HDR, 2006).

This work has “significant gender differentials” in terms of women’s independence and empowerment (Chakraborty, 2008). “Access to water near the home can save significant amounts of time for women and girls- time that can be spent on productive activities and education, which lay the groundwork for economic growth” and reduce women’s “time poverty”⁵ (Lenton, Wright, Lewis 2005). Families sacrifice potential earned income when they have high levels of time poverty. Women, especially, tend to engage in unpaid labor to save the family money. This type of behavior is intricately linked to income poverty and perpetuates the cycle of poverty, thus “time poverty affects income poverty” with a particular gender slant (HDR, 2006, 12).

Keeping these facts in mind, it become apparent that if water is even less available due land grabs, the burden on women to find and gather water for their households will be significantly increased. In 2000, a study found that “worsening water-gathering infrastructure caused an increase in the total work burden of women” (Chakraborty, 2008). It has been proven that proper public investment to achieve water access can address inequalities of household division of labor (Chakraborty, 2008). Water collecting goes beyond a loss of time. The ugly truth of women’s daily treks to gather water is the frequently documented, and altogether too common, instances of sexual assault. The increased walking time for Ethiopian women relocated through villagization has exacerbated the existing vulnerable state of women, with incidences of sexual assault already reported (HRW, 2012, 38).

The Next Generation

Young children are especially impacted by the scarcity and quality of water from the time of their primary education onward. Many children in Ethiopia spend their days walking long distances to collect water or at home doing household chores that their parents are not able

to do perform because of their own time poverty.

For young girls, many are forced to drop out of school once they reach their reproductive years because there are no toilets at their schools to address their needs. “Many parents simply will not allow their daughters to attend schools that do not have separate sanitation facilities for boys and girls after menarche—and few schools in poor areas do” (Lenton, Wright, Lewis, 2005). Compounding the difficulties, disease from waterborne illness regularly causes children to be absent from school. Water-related diseases such as diarrhea and parasitic infections cost 443 million school days each year in Ethiopia alone, and impact the ability of those affected children to learn (HDR, 2006, 45). Even if those sick children are able to come to school, they are less likely to perform well as issues with memory, attention span, and basic problem solving skills have been reported (Lenton, Wright, Lewis 2005, 37).

The Environmental Impact

Large-scale agribusinesses often yield disastrous environmental repercussions that stem from mono-cropping, improper disposal of chemicals and fertilizers, and overuse of water supplies. Governments are also often willing to allow or aid in creating megadams, canals, and irrigation systems that displace local residents. Ethiopia is no exception to such practice. The megdam projects known as the Gibes I, II and III, hydrologic dams along the Omo River, are prime examples. These policies not only disrupt citizens’ access to water for agriculture or personal use, they severely disturb the surrounding environment.

Additionally, it is suspected that the absence of regulations and lack of general land grab monitoring will cause permanent damage to water sources from extensive withdrawals and potential pollution from fertilizers and pesticides (Oakland Institute, 2011 (b)). This becomes an even more pressing issue in the face of climate change. Changes in weather patterns, water distribution, and rainfall will threaten poor populations unable to protect themselves

⁵ Time poverty refers to the excessive time devoted to tasks that could be easily completed by infrastructure.

from flooding, erosion, water shortages, and deforestation (Lenton, Wright, Lewis, 2005).

Conclusions

It has been suggested by organizations such as the World Bank that there are circumstances under which land investments can be responsible, or even beneficial.

These seven 'Principles for Responsible Agro-Investment'- respecting land and resource rights, ensuring food security, ensuring transparency, consultation and participation, responsible agro-investment, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability- are ideal, yet not reflective of the current investment dynamic in Ethiopia (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011).

The most imperative principle- getting community buy in through consultation and participation- is not being met at this current state. Even if local people were more directly involved, the issue of environmental and social justice during land negotiations between investors and indigenous people still remains. There is an inherent power imbalance between indigenous populations and large-scale land investors, due to differences between investors' and locals' knowledge of the land's value, Ethiopia's lack of individual property rights, and each side's understanding of the impacts of land investments. Ethiopia's land acquisition process could seek to incorporate clan leaders or local elders in an attempt to be more representative of indigenous populations' wishes, but how representative and accountable such leaders would be of the populations they represent could not be guaranteed (Cotula, 2009). Putting power in concentrated leadership could also create the possibility for corruption and bribes. In communities around the globe, participation in land rights negotiations does not always guarantee of the most equitable outcome. Residents' wishes can still be ignored or deemed less important than the wishes of the state.

As Ethiopia's current policy stands, it is apparent that the Ethiopian government does not take into account the wishes of the local

inhabitants. With the present conditions, it is hard to imagine that land investment will ever be able to be a fair deal for indigenous communities like those in Gambella. Until these populations can be guaranteed equal rights and protection under the law, land grabs cannot possibly result in sustainable development for Ethiopia or its people.

Groups like the Human Rights Watch, Oakland Institute, UNHCR, ActionAid, and UNICEF continue to do good work in monitoring and calling attention to the situation in Ethiopia. In 2014, the US government drafted the Omnibus Appropriations Bill, which contained provisions that ensure that US development funds would not be used to support forced evictions in Ethiopia. "With this bill, USAID, the State Department, as well as the World Bank, will have to reconsider the terms and modalities of the support they provide to the Ethiopian government" (Mittal, 2014). Steps like these are just the beginning in a long effort to prevent illegal and harmful land transactions.



Emily Ingebretsen received her MA in International Affairs from the New School in 2012, where she concentrated primarily on global economic development and human rights. Since graduation, she has focused on pursuing collaborative development in water access, women's and indigenous empowerment, and sanitation. Originally from Jackson, MS, Emily now lives in New York and works for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc, an organization dedicated to litigating and advocating for civil rights in the United States.

A copy of Emily's full thesis can be found on our [website](#).

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