



ENGINEERING ETHNIC CONFLICT

THE TOLL OF ETHIOPIA'S PLANTATION
DEVELOPMENT ON THE SURI PEOPLE

NOVEMBER 2014



The Oakland Institute

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The views and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the Oakland Institute alone and do not reflect opinions of the individuals and organizations that have sponsored and supported the work.

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Cover photo: Communal field clearance for Torodoi, a new settlement inside the Koka plantation.

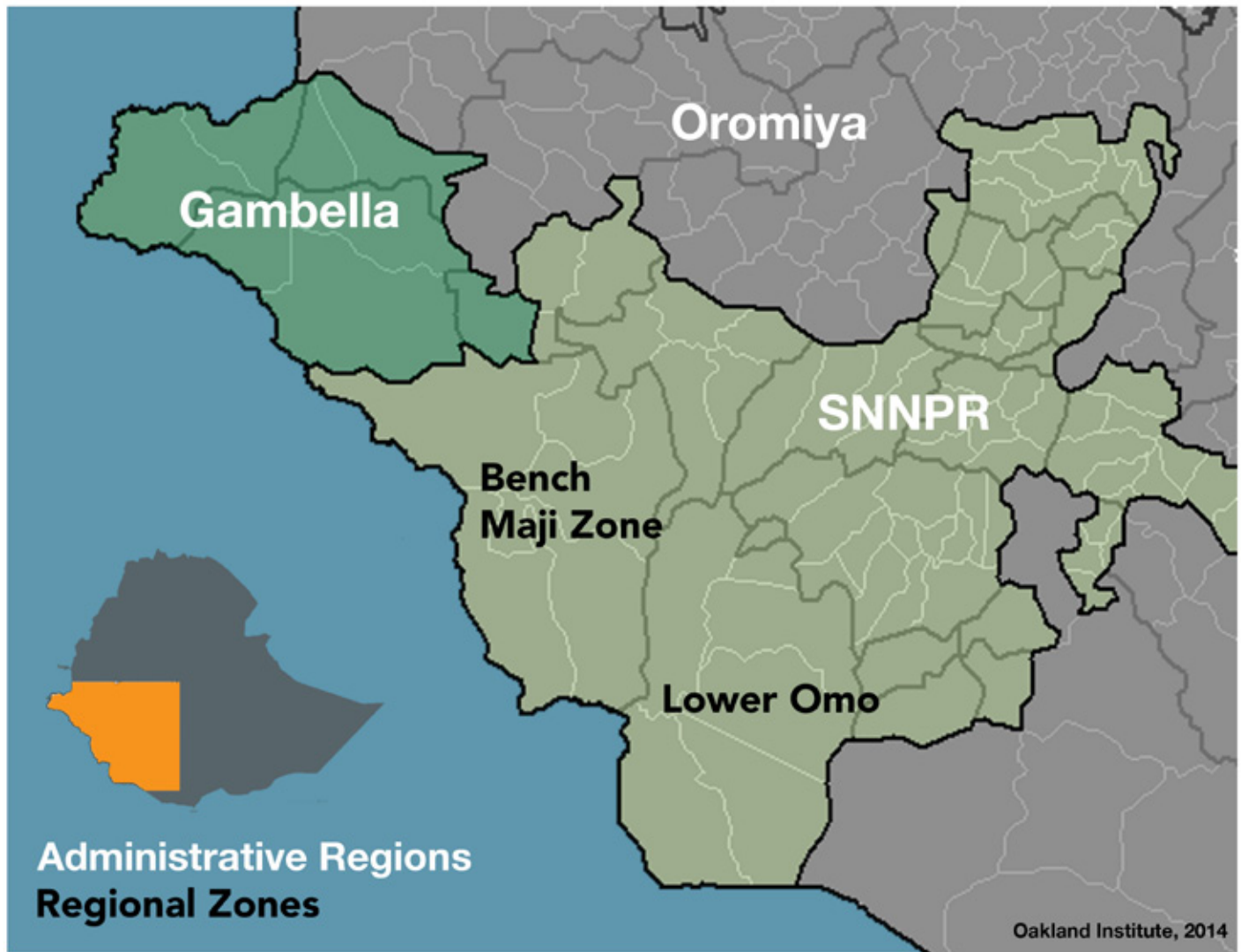
Back photo: Koka plantation site.

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For more information:

The Oakland Institute
PO Box 18978
Oakland, CA 94619 USA
www.oaklandinstitute.org
info@oaklandinstitute.org



Methodology

The evidence for this report was gathered in 2012 and early 2013 from site visits and interviews, at 9 *kebeles*, the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia (similar to municipalities), in the area surrounding the Malaysian-backed plantation in Koka, part of the Bench Maji Zone of Ethiopian Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). Interviewees included Suri, Dizi, and Amhara peoples of the area, as well as government employees.

Interview questions aimed to investigate and confirm reports of violence, assess the conditions of forced settlement, and gauge the impact of Koka plantation on local livelihoods. During the course of the interviews it became clear that the Suri fear retaliation for speaking out against the government. For security reasons, this report's endnotes include only the initials of informants and interviewees. A related consideration is the significant constraint of conducting field research in the presence and under the suspicious watch of military and police forces, both on researchers and informants. Investigative NGOs are absent from the area and it is not possible to obtain a permit to research displacement, which prevents conventional methodological academic research.



Koka plantation.

Overview

“In Africa, Ethiopia is at the forefront of handing out land.”

—Jon Abbink, Anthropologist, 2011¹

Recently dubbed “Africa’s Lion” (in allusion to the discourse around “Asian Tigers”), Ethiopia is celebrated for its steady economic growth, including a growing number of millionaires compared to other African nations.² However, as documented in previous research by the Oakland Institute,³ the Ethiopian government’s “development

strategy,” is founded on its policy of leasing millions of hectares (ha) of land to foreign investors. Implementation of this strategy involves human rights violations including coerced displacement, political repression, and neglect of local livelihoods, and places foreign and political interests above the rights and needs of local populations, especially ethnic groups who have historically been marginalized and neglected by the government.

Following years of investigative reports by the Oakland Institute, other NGOs, and media chronicling the effects of direct and indirect displacement under the Ethiopian government’s development strategy, the US Senate adopted language in the 2014 appropriations bill placing strict



restrictions on aid provided to Ethiopia. The Senate's language addressed the reports of coerced resettlement in the South Omo and Gambella regions of Ethiopia in particular—both of which have been subjects of Oakland Institute investigations.⁴ The bill specifies that funds allocated to Ethiopia under appropriations for “Development Assistance” and the “Economic Support Fund” cannot “be used to support activities that directly or indirectly involve forced evictions,” stressing that funds should “support initiatives of local communities to improve their livelihoods . . . and be subject to prior consultation with affected populations.”⁵ The bill goes further and instructs US-funded international financial institutions such as the World Bank to oppose financing for any activities that directly or indirectly involve forced evictions in Ethiopia.⁶

This report investigates the impact of agricultural development schemes over conflict and social cohesion in the Zone Bench Maji, a district in the Southwest corner of Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region. In particular it examines the way the Ethiopian government has been implementing its “villagization” program, or *sefara*—the coerced settlement of non-sedentary Ethiopians—on the Suri people and the role of international aid programs in support of such activities.

Findings show the destabilizing effects of foreign investment around a 31,000-hectare plantation near Koka, in southwestern Ethiopia. The establishment of the plantation has dramatically disturbed the delicate political order between ethnic groups in the region by upsetting historically established grazing practices and exacerbating pre-existing ethnic tensions. This report suggests therefore that violence and ethnic clashes in and around the project area are not due to ethnic “backwardness,” but come as a direct consequence of the promotion of plantations and the development strategy sought by the government of Ethiopia.

‘Development’ plans of the Ethiopian government and related forced settlements have resulted in not only increased clashes between ethnic groups, in particular the Suri and the Dizis, but also an escalation of resource wars, tribal leader imprisonment, terror, increased conservatism among ethnic youth, loss of local livelihoods, and increased dependency on food handouts.⁷

The report also shows how the World Bank Group and the International Fund for Agricultural Development

(IFAD) fund the Pastoral Community Development Project (PCDP), which plays a pivotal role in the forced settlement of Suri pastoralists and the conditional and coercive distribution of food assistance.

Evidence shows the harsh outcomes of the development strategy pursued by the Ethiopian government and necessitates action by international financial institutions and donor agencies to ensure that the government places the interests of pastoralist Ethiopians over those of foreign investors. Given the role of PCDP program in forced resettlement, it is also the responsibility of the US administration to ensure that international institutions receiving US funding such as the World Bank and IFAD take immediate action to abide by the provisions of the 2014 appropriations bill.

Introduction

Early in 2012, the Oakland Institute received reports of violent incidents near the 30,000-hectare Koka plantation. A May 2012 press release from the Friends of Lake Turkana, a Kenyan NGO, reported:

In Suri, the government has cleared all the grass and trees to allow Malaysian investors to establish plantations. Water has also been diverted from the mainstay Koka River to these plantations leaving the largely pastoral Suri without water for their cattle. . . . Following this violation of their rights, the Suri took arms and engaged the government forces. The government forces killed 54 unarmed Suri in the market place at Maji in retaliation. It is estimated that between 57 and 65 people died in the massacre and from injuries sustained on that day. Five more Suri have been killed since then...Suri people are being arrested randomly and sentenced to 18, 20 and 25 years for obscure crimes.⁸

The primary goal of the research undertaken for this report was to investigate the actual facts behind this alarming information and to identify how these events are related with agricultural development schemes in the Zone Bench Maji. Based on field work undertaken in 2012 and early 2013 in the area surrounding the Malaysian financed and operated Koka plantation, the report looks at the way the Ethiopian government has been implementing its “villagization” program and the role of international aid programs in support of such activities.



Olikoro, killed in Maji market massacre.



Ngohole, killed in Maji market massacre.

WHO ARE THE SURI?

Composed of two subgroups, the Chai and Tirmaga, some 34,000 ethnic Suri live in the lowlands of Southwestern Ethiopia, and have lived in the Ethiopian-Sudanese border regions for some 250 to 300 years.⁹ Suri livelihoods consist of herding livestock (cattle, goats, and sheep), shifting cultivation, and hunting and gathering. Since the 1980s, Suri have traded alluvial gold with highland traders for cash income, often used for cattle purchases.



Standard Suri house in Koka.





Suri cattle camp on Koka plantation periphery.

Cattle hold a strong cultural significance in Suri society, which has been described as a “cattle-centered culture.” For the Suri, cattle are not simply a material asset.¹⁰ Anthropologist Jon Abbink explains that to the Suri, cattle are “the life-sustaining and meaningful companion animal *par excellence*...Cattle are virtually a part of human society if not its essential precondition.”¹¹ Placing in perspective what the loss of cattle means to the Suri people, he adds, “cattle are the subject of the Suri poetic imagination and of endless discussion and comparison between the owners.”¹² Very rarely are cattle eaten—and only in large ceremonies. Most often cattle are used for ceremonial purposes, milk, cow blood ceremony, and in times of emergency, for trade and sale. But cattle herding is also deeply connected to the livelihoods of the Suri, both in normal and hard times.

Central to Suri survival has been a series of traditional coping mechanisms against famine, the most central of which has been their short-term migration and the rare sale of cattle. Mobility has been a part of Suri synergy with ecological lifecycles, and also enables the maintenance of large cattle holdings—once estimated at 50 per male household, although this number has dwindled in the past decade.

While the Suri have lived in the Ethiopia–Sudan border for many generations, their mobility has been constrained in recent years by large-scale land leases that are pushing the Suri into land used by surrounding groups, often exacerbating ethnic struggle. The Ethiopian government’s forced reduction of cattle herding and land access has had disastrous consequences for Suri culture, making them vulnerable to the effects of famine as traditional coping mechanisms are curtailed and local inter-ethnic trade is interrupted by violence.

A History of Tension

The report suggests that the government’s development strategy is leveraging and heightening ethnic antagonisms, but the friction is certainly not new. The history of ethnic tensions in the region suggests that the Suri are neither backward nor passive, but rather their condition is deeply dependent on geopolitics, the arms trade, and their ability to use gold for trade and mobility to adapt to political changes.

At the start of the 1980s, the principal adversaries of the Suri were the Nyangatom, who occupied an area south of the Suri lands across the Kibish River in Sudan. At the time, the Nyangatom were regarded the most well-armed ethnic group in the region, a result of a substantial flow of automatic rifles into Sudan during the civil war. Because they had lost hunting rights in Omo National



Park, the Suri were left “defenseless in the double sense: not only did they lack food reserves (deprived of hunting in the park) but they also had too few weapons to raid (or protect themselves) from their neighbors (principally the Nyangatom to the south) for cattle.”¹³ Tensions with the Nyangatom reached an all-time high during the famine of 1984-1985, partially as a result of natural misfortune but also due to policies that eroded traditional coping mechanisms including “the sale of cattle, hunting and gathering, and short term migration.”¹⁴ The aggregate pressures of violence with the Nyangatom and the famine pushed the Suri to move into the Maji foothills between 1986-1987, an area inhabited by the Dizi—a group with whom the Suri had a traditional “ritual bond . . . where the Dizi would perform a rain-ceremony for the Suri if they suffered from lack of rain.”¹⁵

A study of ethnic groups in Northeast Africa also reports bonds of “group interdependence” and even friendship that developed around local trade. Wolde Gossa Tadesse, an Ethiopian-born anthropologist, describes dynamic inter-ethnic trade between the Suri and Dizi in Maji, where Suri would provide animals that Dizi would trade for grain and clay pots.¹⁶ Since the killings in Maji, Siri, and Dizi alike have expressed fears of traveling to the marketplace.

For some time, this relationship of ritual solidarity has coexisted with confrontation over resources. As resources become scarcer, relationships of mutual solidarity become increasingly subordinated to territorial violence.

The political position of the Suri changed after 1986, during a period that has been called the “Suri Gold Rush.” Although the Suri had no use for gold in their own society, they found that it provided them with cash that proved useful in buying tools, cattle, and, eventually, guns. Rather than spurring them to enter a market economy, anthropologist Jon Abbink notes that these were precisely the items “which would enable them to reestablish their traditional economy and reinforce their hold over their traditional territories.”¹⁷ This is the historical period when violence began to escalate between the Suri and the Dizi, to whose traditional lands the Suri had fled.

Enter into this historical context the Ethiopian government’s development strategy of leasing large swathes of land to foreign investors, escalating an already precarious situation. Existing strained relations and attempts to maintain traditional livelihoods amid further reduction of resources have predictably increased ethnic violence.

INVESTIGATION OF THE VIOLENT 2012 INCIDENTS IN MAJI

Interviews with individuals whose family members were killed, Dizi government workers, and other informants shed light on the tragic incident that took place in February, 2012 in Maji. First, three Dizi policemen were killed by Suri who resisted the Dizi policemen’s attempts to mark their land for the sefara (the Amharic term for settlement) program. The land marking was intended to enable the expansion of the Koka plantation.

Even before the event, Suri resentment toward the Dizi had been mounting, given the Dizi collaboration with the government. In an act of retaliation just a few days later, Dizi killed 30-50 Suri men and women with machetes and stones in a Saturday market in the town of Maji, the events of which were reported in the Friends of Lake Turkana’s media release.¹⁸

Field work in the area revealed that bodies were dumped in a stream beneath Maji on the footpath between Maji town, Kersia and Kibbish. Bodies of deceased were not returned to families in Kibbish. It has not been possible to confirm the precise numbers of dead since no police report was filed.



Maji place of body dumping.



Maji place of the 2013 killing.



Engineering Ethnic Tensions between Suri and Dizi

The Dizi, with an estimated population of 47,800, are Omotic-speaking sedentary cultivators and workers. They trace their nineteenth-century ancestors to semi-independent chiefdoms that developed terrace agriculture on the hillsides and valleys of the Maji area. According to anthropological evidence, the Dizi are “the oldest and politically dominant inhabitants of the area.”¹⁹ Now, they rely heavily on cultivation of maize, sorghum, spices, coffee, vegetable and root crops, and limited cattle herding.

In recent years, the tensions between the Suri and the Dizi have resulted in bloody violence. The Dizi, whose status has remained closer to “highlanders,” have been more open to the government of Ethiopia’s development strategy and have been the disproportionate beneficiaries of political spoils, complicating relations between the Suri and the Dizi and escalating tensions. The association between the Dizi and the Ethiopian state is highly

significant; anthropologist Abbink explains, “in attacking the Dizi, the Suri also attacked the state, because it showed that the latter was incapable of protecting citizens who pledged [their] adherence.”²⁰ It has been reported that Dizi are employed in the local police force, local schools, and government offices, which accounts for their association with the central government in the eyes of others. Interviews suggest that Dizi are recruited for plantation work as well. Dizi have maintained closer relations with Christian evangelicals, who claim that 72 percent of the Dizi are Christian.²¹ As Abbink summarized, “Of all the groups in the area, the Dizi have become most associated with (and dependent upon) the central Ethiopian government and with the dominant Ethiopian Orthodox Christian highland values.”²²

The combination of the Dizi’s relative political privilege, the strategy of large-scale land leases, and the Suri’s distrust of the state account for the erosion of local relationships of mutuality and the increased inter-ethnic violence.



Worker on the koka plantation.



The Koka Plantation

The region around the Koka plantation in the Kibbish *woreda* (district) has been the site of increased foreign investment as well as robust social resistance. The 30,000-hectare Koka plantation was established in 2010 to produce palm oil, although the plantation has expanded to grow moringa trees, maize, and future plans include rubber trees as well.



Koka plantation.

An Ethiopian government employee in Maji *woreda* confirmed reports that the Koka plantation sought to expand threefold (by 60,000 ha) within five years, yet recent reports suggest that the plantation was closed in March 2014 due to “security reasons.” Given the plantation occupied Suri grazing land, this tripling in size—to over 80,000 ha—would have been an even more catastrophic development for the Suri’s main livelihood, which revolves around cattle. Indeed, the first episode of violence in February 2012, in which three Dizi policemen were killed, occurred over the police marking land for planned expansions of the Koka plantation.²³ The month before the closure of the plantation, three plantation workers were allegedly killed.

The dramatic reconfiguration of land for foreign investment in the Koka plantation, as well as its alleged failure, illustrates the haphazard manner in which the government of Ethiopia implements its development strategy. While there have been reports of Suri returning to the plantation lands to take corn and sweet potatoes, the palm tree-lined land is no longer suitable for grazing. Although presumably investors are unhappy with the failure of their cheaply leased land, the local impact has been the increase of local ethnic conflicts and the drastic altering of local livelihoods. As such, the Koka plantation is representative of the Ethiopian strategy of pursuing foreign investor-led development at the expense of local inhabitants.



There has been much confusion and secrecy around the ownership and principal investor of the Koka plantation. A sign outside the Koka Plantation names Malaysian Siow Lim Jin as the owner of the plantation. However, the Ministry of Agriculture’s official list of investors does not mention Siow Lim Jin as signatory of any land lease. The Oakland Institute requested clarification from the Ethiopian embassy in Washington D.C., but received no reply by the time of writing, despite several requests. In

2008, it seemed plausible that AgriNexus International, a Malaysian plantation management consultancy company, was associated with the plantation through the Ethiopian Horizon Plantation PLC (a subsidiary to Al Amoudi Enterprises), which managed the plant, but this cannot be confirmed. The secrecy around the Koka plantation is reflected in local perceptions of the plantation: Suri characterize the owner of the plantation as “the manager,” who, in their interpretation, bribes security forces to remain posted around the plantation—although it is common for federal land leases to include a security clause that ensures federal forces will secure the leased land. One 2012 land lease contract in Ethiopia’s Somali regional state guaranteed “Peaceful and trouble free possession of the premises, and it shall be provided adequate security, free of cost, for carrying out its entire activities in the said premises, against any riot, disturbance, or any other turbulent time. . . .”²⁴

Recent History of Displacement: Producing “Illegal” Status

In an act of resistance in 2012, soon after the Koka plantation, Suri pastoralists crossed the Koka plantation fence to graze their cattle and gather some of the plantation’s maize. When plantation managers noticed, they dug a moat around the plantation’s crops—evidently for exclusion, as fieldwork found evidence of an alternative irrigation system in place. Shortly thereafter, Suri reportedly used trees to make a bridge and take plantation crops.²⁵ Painting this transgression as a merely wilful intrusion ignores recent history. The land where the Koka plantation was built had, since the 1980s, served as the Suri’s main—and absolutely crucial—dry season rangeland. As one local Ethiopian government employee conceded, “after plantation and *sefara*, how the cattle will find place—no one knows. That’s the big question.”²⁶ Following the Suri response to the Koka plantation intrusion, Ethiopian



Ditches around Koka plantation preventing cattle from entry.



Security Forces fortified the plantation, allegedly under the patronage of plantation owners.²⁷

Observers have commented on the irony of a community being labeled illegal squatters on the land that they have used as their primary cattle grazing area for decades.²⁸ As it stands, ethnic communities who have long resided in the region have been rendered “illegal” by domestic legislation, profit-motivated demarcation, and foreign investment. The Koka plantation, along with similar large-scale foreign investments, is not the first to pit Indigenous peoples against a business model driven by foreign investment.²⁹

In 2005, the South African-based African Parks Network (APN), founded by Dutch tycoon Paul Fentener van Vlissingen, signed an agreement with the government of Ethiopia that granted control over the 64,000-hectare Omo National Park. Early attempts at making the park commercially profitable required developing infrastructure for the tourist industry and regulating land use by the eight ethnic groups (Me'en, Bodi, Kwegu, Mursi, Muguji, Suri [two subgroups: the Chai and the Tirma], Dizi, and

Nyangatom) whose livelihoods depended on land within the park.³⁰ In the words of one analyst, “APN found an ally in the Ethiopian authorities, who had been trying to evict the inhabitants ever since the parks were created in the 1960s and 70s.”³¹ Conservation efforts sought to “rescue” the park from the allegedly destructive practices of local communities, but as the NGO International Rivers points out, the region has “since time immemorial” sustained eight Indigenous communities.³² In October 2008, three years into its 25-year contract, the APN pulled out of Ethiopia allegedly due to the difficulty of “securing” land for tourists to “enjoy in peace.”³³ Not surprisingly, given the transition corresponded with a spike in food prices and investment in agriculture, the strategy to make the Omo National Park “commercially profitable” has shifted from tourism to agricultural investment. By 2013, one-third of the national park had been earmarked for large-scale sugar plantations, with ten sugar factories planned to be operational in and around the park by 2015.³⁴ That sugar plantations are being developed despite the continued dispute over the park illuminates the double standard of criminalizing non-industrial livelihood practices within the park a few years earlier.



View toward Suri Udumt and Omo Park.

Since the end of the APN's management of the Omo National Park, the Ethiopian government has restricted local communities from using the "protected" parklands, which are nevertheless being sliced up for tourist and agricultural development. The Gibe III Dam is just one example of the way the park and surrounding lands are being made "commercially profitable" by turning the Omo Valley into an agro-industrial powerhouse. There is a fundamental tension and arguable hypocrisy in the concurrent development of a tourism industry that capitalizes on Suri culture (which is perceived to be unspoiled, relative to other ethnic communities) and the agro-industrial development that necessitates the destruction of Suri culture and renders their cultural and livelihood practices "illegal."

Terms of Sefara (process of settlement)

It is important to distinguish *sefara*, which refers to the process of settling non-sedentary groups, from other forms of resettlement implemented by the government of Ethiopia. In fact, it is not re-settlement, because the Suri groups that are being targeted are not and have never been sedentary. Thus, settlement implies a much more profound livelihood and cultural transformation than simply a geographic relocation—what can be characterized as a form of small-scale urbanization. A

"Here they push and push and push until we don't have a choice. I did not decide to go myself. I go because they push."

—C.D., Suri man, 40 to 50 years old, in Regia Village

joint venture of the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the World Bank, the Pastoral Community Development Project, a federal program that oversees the distribution of food aid in settled sites, implements the settlement program.

Oakland Institute's research concludes that *sefara*, which began in 2011 in the Suri area, is indirect coercion. The principal means of coercion is the threat of arrest and violence, the conditional distribution of food aid, and the cutting off of resources, particularly grazing land and water to sustain pastoral livelihoods. Through *sefara*, the government of Ethiopia not only clears land for investment, but also, as determined from interviews, often confiscates guns from the Suri. The collection of guns has the effect of shifting the balance of power in the area between Suri and Dizi, as gun collections do not target the Dizi the same way.



Inside a korokoro house near Kibbish.

Consultations for *sefara* begin prior to settlement. According to reports, the meetings are usually attended by older, often secular Suri and decisions are not binding, as one last-minute government decision on the type of housing in villages illustrated. One *galsa*, a village head attending consultation meeting, was told, “only thieves live in grass houses, go and live in the new *korokoro* [houses with tin roofs in settlements] house and [then] we know you are not a thief.” This example illustrates the pressure to “modernize” by Ethiopian government standards, rather than supporting agro-pastoral and pastoral needs and traditions.³⁵ Settlements do include a series of amenities, including small animal health posts and schools. Yet, as a consequence of this small-scale urbanization, Suri cannot sustain the large number of cattle they are accustomed to in these settlements. While each Suri man is accustomed to owning 15 to 50 head of cattle, Ethiopian government workers explained that they expected settlements to sustain 5 heads of cattle per Suri man.

The dramatic decline in cattle holdings has significant consequences for Suri practices of marriage, Indigenous coping mechanisms, and also in terms of cultural identities and metaphysical practices. For pastoralists, cattle is not just an asset, it is a way of life. Cattle are perceived as somewhat equal beings, they are also social markers of age grades, and prime actors in aesthetic concepts within

Suri culture. By removing cattle, the core of Suri culture is deteriorated and ultimately eliminated.

As one frustrated Ethiopian government worker explained, “We, [government] workers, know *korokoro* house is bad for Suri but we just do our job. We have to work. *Sefara* is badly planned and managed.”³⁶

Conditions in Resettled Villages

In the last two years, the number of *kebeles* has plummeted from 21 to 16.³⁷ Suri groups settled under *sefara* are subjected to various forms of pressure. Research and interviews in the area suggest that the *sefara* process has been marked by an absence of meaningful consultations with communities to be displaced, contradicting the Ethiopian government and international donors’ claim of voluntary settlement. When the government does approach the community for consultations, the meetings function primarily as announcements of relocation. In exchange for a fixed ration of grains, Suri are moved to *korokoro* houses. The tin-roofed *korokoro* houses lack foundations to keep mud out during the rainy season. Suri are required to supply the wood for their *korokoro* homes. *Sefara* villages do not contain sufficient land for grazing nor subsistence farming; informants explained that instead, settled Suri were asked not to use fields (for grazing or farming) for two to eight years in exchange for food aid.³⁸



Torodoi, new settlement inside Koka plantation.



While reports from the Gambella region suggest that resettlement there required communities to build their own homes, under *sefara*, laborers from different ethnic backgrounds are contracted by the Ethiopian government to build *korokoro* homes. Upon construction, Suri must register their *korokoro* homes as a requirement to receive food aid—which is distributed through the PCDP infrastructure. Resistance to settlement is exemplified by accounts of Suri who continue to live in their old homes after registering their *korokoro* homes.³⁹ Interviews suggest that only the sick and elderly remain in *korokoro* homes. As one interviewed PCDP worker in the region explained, “Now no one live[s] in the new houses, maybe after one year they fall down.”⁴⁰

Education in Settlements

Interviews with students in settled sites reveal a deep mistrust of government education as well as a fear of ending up in prison. In 2012, the Koka Primary School had approximately 130 students enrolled—20 of whom were boarding at the school. The school was expanded under the PCDP in anticipation of the increase of students as a result of *sefara*. However, during a 2013 research visit, the number of students had declined significantly.

Suri from nearby Mizan and mothers from the Torodoi informal settlement (on the Koka plantation) confirmed that students were staying away from school because they perceived it as a gateway to prison. The reason being that the most likely employer for educated Suri youth is the

Ethiopian government, as most plantation jobs go to Dizi. According to interviews, Suri youth observe that many who work for the Ethiopian government end up in prison, or live under the threat of imprisonment. This occurs because Suri state workers are eventually asked to enforce policies they interpret to be against the interest of their communities. Refusal to comply brings harsh action against them. One example cited in interviews is a former management-level *woreda* employee who was sentenced to 16 years in prison for allegedly inciting violence between Suri and Dizi after holding a meeting with Suri students to encourage them to stand up for their rights. This incident reinforces the common Suri impression that state schools are a gateway to political imprisonment. An interviewee stated that in the Hartega and Duku settlement sites the schools were almost empty.⁴¹

The Koka Plantation and “Resource Wars”

As noted by a recent *Foreign Policy* article “the land-grab phenomenon [in Ethiopia] also threatens to foster instability and conflict over scarce resources, population shifts, and the best way to feed expanding countries.”⁴² There are many dimensions to the resource effects of the government’s development strategy. At a macro level, the strategy depends on global investment that secures resources (palm oil, rubber, sugar) for foreign markets. This, in turn, necessitates a profound transformation in resource management within domestic markets, as evidenced by land grabs and irrigation projects that are tailored to large-scale monoculture and not domestic food



Koka plantation.



In Ethiopia, natural resources are being structured not to produce food for subsistence but rather to produce money through foreign trade. The destructive effects of these silent (and legalized) resource wars are made explicit when monetary fluctuations make the purchase of foreign food unsustainable. However, at the micro level, this global resource restructuring is causing deep disruptions to local livelihoods and fueling existing regional antagonisms.

Developing Old Antagonisms: Producing Instability

Field research indicates that the Ethiopian government is manipulating existing tensions, particularly between the Dizi and Suri, by favoring the Dizi in employment. The 2012 slaughter of Suri in the Maji marketplace was retaliation for the killing of three Dizi policemen who were collaborating with the Ethiopian government in marking land for further plantation expansion.⁴³ According to Suri sources, “the Malaysian plantation paid taxes to the Dizi *woreda* and the Dizi liked the plantation very much so the Dizi *woreda* helped them to expand and they demarcated with GPS.”⁴⁴

In addition to employing Dizi in plantation work and growth services, interviews suggest that in Tum (Maji *woreda*), Dizi are given charge of the prisons that hold Suri—this claim requires further investigation, but is likely given that Dizi policemen are also tasked with marking land for plantation expansion. According to field research, the increase in violent clashes between the Suri and Dizi can be linked to the intrusion of the Koka plantation and displacement of Suri from lands vital for cattle raising, one of their most important livelihood resources.

The effects of the two violent clashes between the Suri and Dizi have been profound. Numerous interviews confirmed that fear of ethnic retaliation is keeping Suri and Dizi alike from accessing markets and water points—further reducing access that is already strained as the diversion of the mainstay Koka River to the plantation resulted in water scarcity for Suri cattle.⁴⁵ As one interviewee explained, “Since February 2012, no Suri comes to Maji because [they] are scared of Dizi.”⁴⁶ Traditionally, Suri’s mobility has been the principal means for both their livelihood and as a means of self-defense from outsiders (enemy groups and the state). It seems evident that the local resource wars exacerbating older antagonisms between the Dizi and Suri are directly linked to the large-scale allocation of land for foreign direct investment and the explicit favoring of the Dizi by government policy in the area.

“Everyday Forms of Resistance”⁴⁷

A final set of findings that emerged from interviews during field research revolves around the generational divide produced by settlement and a return to cultural conservatism resulting from the perceived threat of government intrusion. However, the divide is not along expected lines.

Instead of older generations holding onto traditions, it is the youth who are resisting the government’s development initiatives by adopting heightened ethnic nationalism that is further increasing tensions with neighboring communities. In practice, this has meant the continuation of sanguine ritual, dueling and scarification and lip plates among women, contrary to Ethiopian government campaigns against “harmful cultural practice.”⁴⁸ In contrast, older Suri were more likely to attend consultation meetings and remain in *korokoro* homes once settled. The tensions between youth and the elders partly stem from the Ethiopian government and regional administrators’ use of elders as “spoke persons” for all Suri, a trend with a history. Suri anthropologist Jon Abbink notes that by the late 1990s the presence of the state and military had grown in part by “exploiting the internal social division between young people who had served in the former national army (now [elders] becoming leaders in the Surma Council) and those [current youth] not exposed to outside life in the wider society.”⁴⁹

Fieldwork also provided evidence of substantial resistance to education services provided by the state as a condition for settlement, which stems from arrests of Suri employees of the Ethiopian government and students as explained earlier.

Dislocation and Migration

Given the Suri’s resistance to the settlement program and the fact that keeping cattle is a cultural and survival necessity, it is not surprising that many Suri have relocated away from main roads and government infrastructure in an attempt to avoid government interaction. Research shows that for the Suri, “being able to remove themselves from the area of contact with ‘intruders’ . . . [has been] a traditional and reliable instrument of resistance.”⁵⁰ Yet, as more land is earmarked for plantation use, the Suri who flee “intruders” are more likely to clash with neighboring ethnic groups and even other nations over resource scarcity produced by global investment. While this claim needs further research, sources indicate that due to lack of access to dry season range land in Koka



(because of the plantation), more cattle is being taken toward the South Sudan border, a dangerous site of conflict with the Nyangatom—a group with a history of antagonistic interactions with the Suri. This is increasing the likelihood of violent clashes over rangeland and cattle raiding between the two groups.⁵¹

Establishing Dependency: Silent Coercion and Food Aid

Interview data shows that a key function of *sefara* settlement is to make the provision of food aid conditional. At the time fieldwork was conducted in the region, food distributions had been occurring for approximately six months. Informants explained that the PCDP oversees food distribution as well as settlement.⁵²



Food distribution at a Koka primary school.

Food aid has an important function within the larger structure of indirect pressure placed on the Suri. With resource pressures placed on Suri livelihoods by diverted water and the plantation expansion, Suri food security is becoming highly precarious. As weekly food rations are contingent upon the registration of a *korokoro* house in a settled village, supplying scarce area wood for fire, and the relinquishment of preparing maize fields for the coming two years—the impacts on self-sufficiency are grave. Field research suggests it means “that any Suri family who did not prepare a field last year are now totally dependent on food distributions or selling their cattle to feed the family. For Suri, selling cattle is not accepted culturally although it happens sometimes in emergencies and for obtaining guns.”⁵³

The Pastoral Community Development Project

The PCDP is a 15-year program implemented by the government of Ethiopia in collaboration with the World Bank and IFAD, with the stated goal of “establishing an effective model of public service delivery, investment and disaster management in the arid and semi-arid Ethiopian lowlands that address pastoral communities’ priority needs, improve their livelihoods, alleviate poverty and reduce their vulnerability.”⁵⁴ The second phase of the program, which ended in 2013, had a total budget of \$138.7 million, with the World Bank covering \$80 million and IFAD providing a loan of \$39 million.⁵⁵ Remaining costs are to be covered by the Ethiopian government and local communities.⁵⁶ The project’s goal is to contribute to the national Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP)’s objectives of “(i) expanding access to and ensuring quality of education and health services [...]; (ii) establishing suitable conditions for sustainable nation building through the creation of a stable, democratic and developmental state [...]”⁵⁷ However, the Oakland Institute’s past research shows that the Ethiopian government’s development strategy—outlined in the GTP—is dependent on the relocation of thousands of Ethiopians and has been characterized by diverse forms of violence.⁵⁸ The government of Ethiopia justifies the relocation of people by the goal of improving their access to basic social, education and health services but the resettlements also enable the implementation of other GTP’s goals, including large-scale plantations and irrigation infrastructure.⁵⁹

A 2008 draft policy statement for the PCDP reveals the contradiction in the stated goal of protecting agro-pastoral and pastoral livelihoods and the government’s export-oriented developmental ambitions. The document explicitly states that the PCDP aims to “restructure the pastoral and agro-pastoral economy over time to conform with market-



oriented economy so that key inputs are accessed through the market as opposed to kinship and social networks as is the case today.”⁶⁰ While the provision of services is often a justification for settlement, the “badly planned and managed” settlements are meant to fulfill another of the document’s stated goals, which is to encourage private sector investment “in commercialized farming, industry, agro-processing, mining, tourism, and others.”⁶¹



PCDP sign in Kurum village near Kibbish.

Even in the context of NGOs, journalists, and even the US State Department’s concern around the use of international development assistance in support of forced displacement and its role in driving resettlement, the World Bank approved funding for Phase III of the PCDP on December 12, 2013, which will run until December 2018 with the Bank contributing \$110 million to the total project cost of \$210 million.⁶² In blatant disregard of evidence gathered by NGOs and researchers, donors have once again turned a blind eye to development assistance enabling displacement and human rights abuses.

Settling Pastoral Ethiopia

In a 2011 “Pastoralist Day” speech in the Lower Omo town of Jinka, late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi justified the large-scale irrigation and agriculture development by promising that “even though this area is known as backward in terms of civilization, it will become an example of rapid development.”⁶³ Both the Gibe III Dam and the Koka plantation are part of a fundamental restructuring of Ethiopian natural resources to favor foreign investment and enable a cash crop economy.

A previous Oakland Institute report outlined how international development organizations approach Ethiopia as three spaces, “Productive Ethiopia,” “Hungry Ethiopia,” and the unruly “Pastoral Ethiopia.”⁶⁴ Pastoral Ethiopia has a population of 15 million (occupying roughly 60 percent of Ethiopia’s land) and has large grazing areas that hold half of the nation’s livestock.⁶⁵ This report focuses on the effects of foreign investment in the SNNP region of Ethiopia, but SNNP is only one of four regions where the PCDP is being implemented and comprises only 6 of the 55 *woreda* districts that the program targeted by the end of Phase II.⁶⁶ It seems that under the PCDP, USAID’s suggestion that “increased labor requirements of Productive Ethiopia’s expanding value chains, particularly for high-value commodities . . . can be met by the underutilized labor available in Hungry and Pastoral Ethiopia,” has become operational thanks to the World Bank’s actions in the Lower Omo region.⁶⁷ USAID’s encouragement to make “Pastoral Ethiopia,” more productive has meant support for large-scale agriculture, and implicitly the opening of land for this type of agriculture through settlement and resettlement, often under euphemisms of “building pastoral resilience.”⁶⁸

The government of Ethiopia claims that plantations in the region (that grow maize, sugar, palm oil, or cotton) will create jobs, contradicting other official statements about the preservation of pastoral cattle and grazing land. In the case of the Suri and Dizi, leveraging this “underutilized” labor requires settling communities and imposing restrictions on traditional livelihood practices as a way of freeing up land and resources for plantations and pushing pastoral groups to eventually join the labor ranks on farms. However, as the Oakland Institute’s past research has found, “inside the Koka plantation were only 20 workers, mostly from other parts of the country, not locals. The workers [were from] impoverished tribes . . . and they never stay long. As pastoralists, all have a single goal: to save their wages to buy a new cow.”⁶⁹

The increase in ethnic clashes, the resurgence of ethnic conservatism, and the subversive practices through which Suri and others undermine the government’s strategy make clear that local populations are resisting the Ethiopian government’s attempt to settle “Pastoral Ethiopia” and wish to retain traditional livelihood practices—and their right to self determination that is guaranteed by international human rights law.

Conclusion

This report highlights new and often overlooked dimensions of the Ethiopian government's non-inclusive development strategy, as well as reframes the increase in ethnic violence not as "backward" but rather a result of resource constraints resulting from the establishment of large-scale plantations. Suri are not passive recipients of forced changes and settlement; instead, they draw upon traditional coping mechanisms such as mobility and conservatism when facing forced change. However, the intensification of external pressures on Suri livelihoods is resulting in increased clashes with neighboring ethnic groups.

More directly, this report shows how the World Bank's support of three phases of the Pastoral Community Development Project implicates Western funds in the coerced settlement of pastoral communities and the conditional—and coercive—distribution of food aid, which seems to be principally aimed at establishing dependency on food aid while devoting increasing amounts of land to growing food crops for export and less on ensuring subsistence. Furthermore, considering existing programs aimed at protecting pastoralists, like the USAID-funded Pastoral Livelihoods Initiative

(PLI), it's clear that protecting and improving pastoral livelihoods is, in effect, a euphemism for transitioning pastoral communities into sedentary habits and coercively incorporating these groups into the market economy. Simply stated, the PCDP is providing the resources while the Ethiopian government is setting the terms for state presence in Bench Maji Zone.

This report highlights the effects of government actions on the Suri people of Southwestern Ethiopia, who are representative of numerous ethnic communities whose subsistence practices and culture are treated as impediments to Ethiopian economic growth. The Suri are not passive in the face of foreign land leases, and the increased violence and rise of ethnic conservatism between ethnic youth are representative of this.

Our hope is that this report—as well as recent revelations of the Ethiopian government's increased surveillance and arrests of journalists and political opponents—will further pressure the US Congress and State Department to renegotiate the development assistance to Ethiopia to protect local communities and instead promote inclusive, participatory development.

Endnotes

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