



AFRICA PROGRAM BRIEF #9

AUGUST
2014

GOVERNING THE HORN OF AFRICA'S LOWLANDS: LAND INVESTMENTS AND VILLAGIZATION IN GAMBELLA, ETHIOPIA

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Since 2001, the Ethiopian government has been committed to building a “developmental state,” one with a strong state-led macro-economic plan, much like that of East Asian countries. After 2005, the developmental agenda took center stage in public discourse. This increasingly dominant discourse frames poverty as an existential threat to Ethiopia’s survival, necessitating its eradication by hastening development at all costs. In recent years, various independent international organizations have agreed that Ethiopia is among the fastest growing economies in the world.¹ As a testament to this trajectory, the Ethiopian government is in the process of planning and implementing various mega-projects for completion within and beyond the “Growth and Transformation Plan” (GTP; 2010/11-2014/15) period. Notable among them are ten sugar industries, which put Ethiopia among the top ten world sugar exporters; the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (the largest in Africa); railroad networks to various parts of the country and light rails in the capital; a fertilizer factory; and the Metal and Engineering Corporation.

Following the global land rush of recent decades that targeted Africa, Ethiopia's lowlands have been turned into a highly sought after "commodity," as a central component of the developmental plan, which includes modernizing the agricultural/rural sector.²

Despite popular perceptions of Ethiopia being a mountainous country, a significant proportion of its territory consists of low-lying land. The typical climate in these lowlands is characterized by high temperatures and low-level, yet highly variable, rainfall, both spatially and temporally. Through various incentives, the Ethiopian government has managed to attract agricultural investment, primarily to large tracts located in the southwestern peripheral lowland areas of Benishangul-



Gumuz and Gambella People's Regional States. Expectations were so high that the drafters of Ethiopia's third poverty reduction paper, the GTP included contingencies for the transfer of close to 3.3 million hectares of land to (foreign and domestic) investors by the end of the five-year period.³

Many commentators have attributed the ruling coalition's intention to lease millions of hectares of land at extremely reduced prices to the desire for increased export earnings; others have attributed it to selfish economic or political incentives. Not situating the land deals within the context of Ethiopia's broader political economy provides an incomplete understanding, which is devoid of reasons drawn from recent "developmental" thinking of the ruling elite.

VILLAGIZATION AND COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE IN ETHIOPIA

Two perspectives regarding why the government is promoting commercial mechanized farming and villagization – also known as commune programs – in the lowlands emerge. Firstly, the intention of the ruling coalition, according to official pronouncements, is to allow all sectors of the population to benefit from national development step by step. In recent years, the northern highland (or the historical core area of the country) and the highland peripheries to the south have comparable socio-economic indicators, while the lowland periphery lags significantly in terms of all indicators.⁴ For the most part, livelihood practices in these lowlands remain traditional, unchanged due to minimal state or market penetration. Government sources stress that Ethiopia's nomadic population can harness such development benefits only through the promotion of commercial farming and sedentarization in these lowlands.

Secondly, meeting the ever-increasing state expenses *in lieu* of mega-projects being

run by new state enterprises has become difficult. Thus, land deals (and villagization, over the long-term) are part and parcel of the government's approach to extract as much revenue as possible from the human and material resources of the country. After all, if one perceives poverty as an existential threat and development as a necessity to eradicate poverty, then shouldn't resources in all parts of the country be harnessed for the developmental effort?

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Successive Ethiopian governments have attempted population relocation schemes to varying degrees. The Derg's (military government, 1974-1991) villagization and resettlement endeavor is often mentioned for its incredible scale, as well as for its ill planning, poor execution and the suffering and loss it caused for the relocated populations. In the late 1980s, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a powerful member of the current ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), rallied against the ill political intentions and high social costs of this effort. The TPLF was apathetic to the benefits of such schemes in the immediate aftermath of its taking state power in May 1991. Relocated people also returned

to their old villages when Derg's power waned. In early 2000s, however, population relocation schemes were resuscitated and reintegrated into Ethiopia's food security and rural development strategies. To a significant extent, villagization had to remain on paper until the end of the decade when, in 2009, the Ethiopian government planned to "villagize" an estimated 1.5 million individuals by mid-2015 per the GTP. The stated objective of this scheme was to provide social services through the congregation of households scattered within a five-kilometer radius to a common village. Ethiopian diaspora groups and international activists have cried foul, arguing that villagization is a sugar-coated name for the forced relocation of local people to make way for land investments. The government, in response to such criticism, stresses that the two – land transfers and villagization – are completely unrelated.

VILLAGIZATION AS SOCIAL ENGINEERING

The view of the planners and implementers of the villagization campaign is to de-skill local people, and re-skill them in forms of 'modern' settled agriculture, farming and livestock rearing.⁵ They intend to do this, in the agriculture sector for example, through intensive agricultural extension service provision. In what seems to be a proper appraisal of the challenging task at hand, the proposed "household to agricultural extension agent ratio" in Gambella is 19:1, while in the Ethiopian highlands one would get no more than three agricultural extension agents per *Kebele*, the lowest administrative level, which

houses hundreds of households.⁶ The rationale of transient forms of agriculture is geared more toward exploiting the variegated resources over space and time through migration.

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Thus, the agricultural tools used are suited to this effort and are not in any way fit to make a specific plot reach its potential productivity. To reverse this inefficiency, the villagization scheme incorporates the dissemination of various agricultural tools, including the simplest hoe. Furthermore, crop varieties and livestock breeds that are well-adapted to the transient forms of livelihood are ill-suited for settled “intensive” farming, leading inevitably to the incorporation of plans to promote the adoption of improved seeds and livestock breeds.

Moreover, if successful, villagization would reduce the economic costs of governing and servicing the lowlands. Thus, villagization could also be perceived as an attempt to convert the social organization of local communities into “governable units.” At the very least, the institution of permanent addresses would make governing easier. The Kebele office and police station to be established per village will do the actual day-to-day governing.

FORCED RELOCATION VS. SOCIAL ENGINEERING

One of the Ethiopian government’s long-term goals in actively engaging in the politically and economically-costly villagization program seems to be to transform transient forms of livelihood into settled forms of cultivation and/or livestock rearing, after a thorough social engineering. This would mean that local people would benefit from increased productivity and improved social service delivery, and the state could more easily govern the territory and population.

This rationale has not been critiqued by the various reports opposing the practice. Such perspectives criticize the process, rather than the intended goal of the program. What is being challenged is “how” the program is being implemented rather than “what” the objectives are. Thus, there seems to be a tacit agreement in the need to rationalize natural resource use in the lowlands.⁷

Among the major issues raised is the lack of prior consultation. Reports consistently indicate that local populations were coerced to join new villages and that the implementation is proceeding without obtaining “free and informed prior consent” from the local population. Despite the government’s insistence that the two are unrelated, reports depict the villagization scheme as a process to create vacant spaces to be leased by investors.⁸ Recommendations from such analyses urge the Ethiopian government to refrain from continuing with the villagization program, and donors to refrain from funding such

schemes (directly or indirectly). The Ethiopian government did not accede to the calls, but it seems that major donors are (re-)considering their (indirect) involvement.

DONOR DILEMMA TO SUPPORT VILLAGIZATION IN THE LOWLANDS

Despite harsh criticism against land deals by academics and calls for restraining “land grabbing” by activists, major international financial organizations steadfastly remained by the side of investors. For example, the World Bank posits that if principles of responsible agriculture are respected by investors and governments, local people stand to benefit from these land deals.⁹

Activists seem to have been more successful with their resistance to the villagization program. The World Bank is investigating whether its financial support was indirectly used to fund villagization in Gambella, following the lodging of a complaint from an Anuak refugee assisted by Inclusive Development International.¹⁰

The United States government seems to be changing its position too. The Appropriations Act of January 13, 2014 limits the use of U.S. funds in the villagization exercise.¹¹ Although villagization is practiced in all lowland regions of Ethiopia, this Act singles out lower Omo and Gambella (see pages 1295-1296 of the Appropriations Act), apparently due to the higher media, activist organizations, and diasporic attention given to these two areas. For the specific case of Gambella, the provisions of the Act appear to be a little too late, as the villagization program was completed in

Gambella in mid-2013. All rural households in Gambella have already been villagized and reports indicate difficulty with returning to old villages. Thus, there would not be any more forced evictions, but what remains is the servicing of those already relocated to the new villages.¹²

More importantly, the U.S. is pursuing a change in policy from passive and tacit support to active dis-engagement.

The 2013 report from the U.S. State Department on Human Rights in Ethiopia alleges that the more than 16 visits to villagization sites by international donors since 2011 found no evidence of forced relocation or systematic abuse of human rights.¹³ Therefore, the shift in US policy does not appear to be based on conclusive evidence. More importantly, the US is pursuing a change in policy from passive and tacit support to active dis-engagement. In the past, neither the US government nor US funds were directly involved in the villagization program – if US funds were used, it was unofficial and indirect. At present, Congress advocates for an active official non-engagement policy.

Judging the merit of such policy decisions on the benefits and costs they have on local people should acknowledge that this policy shift has little, if any, positive contribution to the welfare of ordinary Ethiopians in Gambella. Rather, it might have negative consequences,

decelerating the pace of social service provision in the new villages.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNITED STATES POLICYMAKERS

Keep the bigger picture in mind:

Land deals and villagization are occurring in all lowlands of Ethiopia within the government's broader development policy. Thus, it would be wrong to consider these issues as isolated from other national developmental projects.

Look beyond procedural issues:

Procedures matter, but they should not be the critical determinant of policy considerations. The necessity for better governance, social services, and extracting significant revenue from Ethiopia's lowlands cannot be denied. The land deals and villagization, in the *longue duree*, seem to do this. Rather than pursuing active dis-engagement, the US should follow a measured and qualified engagement policy that would be more beneficial to local people.

Attention to nuances:

Hitherto approaches to limit villagization are clear-cut, while the extent of implementation in various areas is different (full villagization in Gambella and much less in Afar and Somali). Furthermore, the approach is not consistently coercive. Some communities voluntarily join new villages. At least in one case, when government officials failed to convince local people of the advantages of joining the new villages, local people effectively resisted relocation and remained in their old villages.¹⁴ These differences should be matched by a nuanced approach based on local realities and

perceptions. Options should also include a planned and regulated return to old villages, with improved governance and services for locals, if the need arises.

Adopt a sectoral approach:

Rather than suspending all support to villagization schemes, the adoption of a sectoral approach would serve local communities best. For example, assisting in the provision of better health services and food aid on humanitarian grounds could make life more bearable in the new villages in the short term and ensure self-reliance over the long term. A sector-blind withdrawal of assistance could contribute to the deterioration of community life, while failing to solve the alleged problem of the use of force.

ENDNOTES

1 See for example Schuman, Michael. (March 13, 2014). Forget the BRICs; Meet the PINES. TIME, Business: Emerging Markets. Retrieved on 20 March 2014 at <http://time.com/22779/forget-the-brics-meet-the-pines/>.

2 Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. (2010). Growth and Transformation Plan (2010/11-2014/15). Volume I: Main Text. Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. (November, 2010). [http://www.mofed.gov.et/English/Resources/Documents/GTP%20Policy%20Matrix%20\(English\)2.pdf](http://www.mofed.gov.et/English/Resources/Documents/GTP%20Policy%20Matrix%20(English)2.pdf)

3 Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. (2010). Growth and Transformation Plan (2010/11-2014/15). Volume I: Main Text. Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. (November, 2010).

4 Markakis, John. (2011). Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers. James Currey, UK.

5 Often the view held by implementers is that these people groups have no prior skill, thus there is no need for the prefixes de- and re-.

6 Interview, Experts at Agriculture Bureau of Gambella People's Regional State, 03 December 2013.

7 See for example, Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2012a; 2012b) and Oakland Institute (OI). (2011). HRW. (2012a). "Waiting here for Death" Forced Displacement and "Villagization" in Ethiopia's Gambella Region. Retrieved on 29 January 2014 from http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/ethiopia0112webwcover_0.pdf; HRW. (2012b). "What will happen is hunger comes?" Abuses against the indigenous peoples of Ethiopia's Lower Omo Valley. Retrieved on 29 January 2014 from http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/ethiopia0612webwcover_0.pdf; OI. (2011). Understanding land investment deals in Africa, Country report: Ethiopia. Retrieved on 29 January 2013 from http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/OI_Ethiopia_Land_Investment_report.pdf.

8 HRW. (2012a).

9 World Bank. (2010). Principles for responsible agricultural investment that respects rights, livelihoods and resources. Washington, DC: World Bank.

10 See: <http://www.inclusivedevelopment.net/ethiopia-gambella-villagization-program/>.

11 This change seems to be a result of the concerted effort of activists, and follows from a Congressional Briefing on "The Land Grab Issue in Africa" held on 15 April 2013. Find the full version of the Consolidated Appropriations Act from <http://docs.house.gov/>

billsthisweek/20140113/CPRT-113-HPRT-RU00-h3547-hamdt2samdt_xml.pdf.

12 HRW. (2012a).

13 See <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/220323.pdf> (pages 10 - 11).

14 Yonas Adaye and Ezra Abate. (2013). Conflict Dimensions of Large-scale Agricultural Investment in Ethiopia: Gambella Case Study. Conference paper presented at "The Socio-political and Conflict Implications of Large Scale Agricultural Investments in the Horn of Africa." Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. (26-27 April, 2013).

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This publication was made possible by the Carnegie Corporation of New York's generous support to the Southern Voices Initiative (SVN), a project of the Africa Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

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