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Threats to the Pastoral Commons - Land-grabbing, Agribusiness, and Hydroelectric Dams in Ethiopia

Abstract

The Federal Government of Ethiopia has dramatically accelerated programs of displacement and resettlement of pastoral and semi-pastoral societies in different regions of the country. These populations make up only 12% of Ethiopia's population yet produce the majority of the country's livestock, the largest number in Africa. Although pastoral production requires mobility for access to grazing and water, the Federal government dismisses these practices as 'primitive' and inefficient. The Ethiopia government has focused economic development on hydro-power and large scale irrigation farming projects for rice, wheat, sugar, and cotton, much of it along rivers in under-populated pastoralist regions. The government's goals include 'modernizing' their pastoral populations by providing social services through resettlement and alternate economies of wage labor and farming. These policies have not been successful and have engendered resistance from the affected pastoralists. Drawing on examples from the Omo River, Awash River, and Borena Plateau, this paper makes recommendations to maintain pastoral livelihoods by preserving common lands while improving social services.

Threats to the Pastoral Commons - Land-grabbing, Agribusiness, and Hydroelectric Dams in Ethiopia

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On 21 January 2011, President Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia addressed the 13th Annual Pastoralist Day Celebrations, held in Jinka, capital of the Southern Omo Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR) in the southwest part of the country. This region is home to many of Ethiopia's isolated tribal groups including the Mursi, Bodi, Dasenech, and Hamer peoples living as agro-pastoralists along or near the Omo River. Meles said:

“Even though poverty and backwardness are a concern for the whole country, it is worse for the pastoralists....The pastoralist's life is nomadic and relies on raising cattle; because of this it was difficult to provide quality healthcare and education. The lack of water and grazing has made keeping livestock difficult and has had no satisfying outcomes. Our government realized this problem and made plans with the pastoralist community. Now we have started working on big infrastructural development such as roads, electricity, and telecommunications. This effort will continue, stronger than ever, for the next five years.... In solving the water problem, depending on the pastoralists' interests, they could have irrigation systems to improve cattle grazing or they could even be involved in farming to improve their lives....”

Meles' policies towards pastoralists constitute one of the most conscious and draconian in Africa, and possibly in the world. (Meles passed away suddenly on August 20 2012 but his government and policies remain firmly in place, at least for now). Although only a small percentage of Ethiopia's 89 million plus population, pastoral and agro-pastoral people occupy 60% of the country and produce much of the commercially valuable livestock – 30% of its cattle, 50% of its goats and sheep, and 100% of its camels. In the world Meles envisioned, Ethiopia's large rivers which pass mainly through the dry lowland regions of the south and east – the Omo in the southwest, the Awash in the east, the Shebelle in the southeast will increasingly supply the country with hydroelectric power and large irrigated farms producing food and lucrative export crops including rice, cotton, sugar, and flowers, which are intended to raise the living standard of the second largest country in Africa (80 million) from one of its poorest (\$350 GDP per capita).

Meles Zenawi rose to power as the head of an armed secessionist movement in Tigray in northern Ethiopia which, in combination with the EPLF of Eritrea, overthrew Mengistu's pro-soviet regime in 1991. Meles initiated a federal system of various ethnic regions which he ruled with his own Tigrayan group firmly in power. He was autocratic and suspended opposition parties and newspapers after a disastrous election campaign in 2005. But unlike neighboring Kenya and other countries, Meles did not swallow whole the neo-liberal agenda proposed by international donors emphasizing privatization and reductions in government responsibility for education and health. He followed his own path which combined state owned enterprises with private local and international investment, much like China whom Meles greatly admired. Like China, Meles supported large industrial growth while keeping a firm grip on political operations through a one party, media controlling state. Ethiopians said Meles always kept one foot in the American shoe, and the other in China. During the last decade Ethiopia saw growth rates of 7-11 percent, with the government providing roads, schools, and hospitals to all the regions of the federation.

In July 2001, the World Bank provided a \$500 million loan project to Ethiopia that would include a government sponsored project to “build long-term drought resilience” in the pastoralist region. Under

the view that traditional pastoralism was declining with increasing drought and periodic famine, the Bank agreed with Meles that the long term goal towards pastoralists should be one of resettlement and the pursuit of new livelihoods, particularly as settled farmers rather than nomadic herders. Agriculture State Minister Mitiku Kassa stated, "Especially for pastoralists, the solution is development interventions, water-centered development. Most areas have surface water and there are rivers." In the dry regions of Somali and Afar, the government hoped that 500,000 people in each will resettle, while in the western states of Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz (north of Gambella) it wanted 450,000 to move into 'modern villages' (Christian Science Monitor, August 1, 2011).

The government steadily created massive hydro electric dams and large scale irrigation agriculture, owned by the government or leased to foreign and local entrepreneurs. The so called "land-grabbing" projects of foreign and state owned agribusiness was to be confined to these under-populated regions, as Meles's political base had always been, and continues to be, small peasant farmers whose land will not be appropriated for state farms, as they had under Mengistu, or for agribusinesses.

These policies were criticized widely by international human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Survival International, Cultural Survival, and Save the Children, as well as international donors including Sweden which withdrew its embassy last year. Meles responded in his Jinka address:

"There are some people who want to block our freedom to use our rivers, and to save our people from poverty. They are creating huge propaganda, but they don't stop there. They are blocking us from getting financial loans from abroad to finish the project. There are also some people who are the best friends of backwardness and poverty, but claim to be concerned about environmental conservation. They don't actually do anything tangible. They just want to keep the pastoralists as a tourist attraction and make sure no development happens in pastoral areas.... The pastoralists don't want to live as a tourist attraction. They want a stable, improved life. We are standing strongly by the idea of creating opportunities for pastoralists to live securely according to their own interests."

In some ways Ethiopia's pastoralist policies have been constructive, particularly when compared to neighboring Kenya and Tanzania. Peter Little and other pastoralist policy experts acknowledged in a recent report the increasing national and official recognition of pastoralism in Ethiopia, noting that the rights of pastoralists are protected by the Ethiopian constitution; pastoral problems have been debated in the parliament, and a Pastoralist Affairs Standing Committee has been established with pastoralist representatives integrated in national planning effort to help end pastoral marginalization (Little et al 2010).

Pastoral development policies emerged in part to a decline in mobile practices where many former pastoralists have fallen out of pastoralism production due to poverty brought about by climatic, social and political factors, leading many to seek alternative livelihoods. The Ethiopian government through regional offices have planned in genuine consultation a variety of initiatives dealing with effective drought management systems including fodder/food security strategies, creating a reserve fund, establish veterinary health systems, and mitigating future environmental damage (Getachew et al 2003).

Despite legal protections, however, there remains large cultural and educational and class differences between those in government and the pastoralists they administer. As Little et al. (2010) point out, the Ethiopian state was founded on farming, and Ethiopian tenure traditions and agricultural practices both have a strong farming bias, where farming takes precedence over pastoralism if there is a conflict over land use. Without legal guarantees, pastoralists have no security of tenure if individuals or outside

interests wish to use their land. Commercial development, extensions to the road network, improved security, and population pressure that has forced farmers to leave the highlands have steadily eroded the isolation of pastoral areas and increased the ability of outside interests to appropriate pastoral property. Without legal protection, the increased accessibility, commercial and conservation value of pastoral land has accelerated pastoral land loss in recent decades.

Human Rights Watch presented two damaging reports in 2012, one dealing with the forced and involuntary resettlement of Nuer and Nyagatom agro-pastoralists from Gambella region in the country's west, and the second one claiming imminent displacement of indigenous pastoral communities in Ethiopia's lower Omo valley, all without adequate consultation or compensation, to make way for state run sugar plantations.

But Ethiopia is not known for buckling under to donors, whether governmental or NGOs, and continues its policies of "encouraging" pastoralists to pursue sedentary lives as farmers. But their government's behavior has shown that they don't have a real alternative to pastoral or agro-pastoral livelihoods currently practiced by the pastoralists. And their policies have directly led to displacement of herders and their animals from traditional grazing and water points, or involuntary resettlement as is occurring, or proposed in western and southwestern parts of the country. It remains unclear what the impact of the displacement and resettlement projects in the wake of the large irrigation agriculture will bring.

I look briefly at three cases of vulnerable indigenous peoples facing severe threats to their way of life: Afar pastoralists in the Awash River valley, Nuer and Anuak; in Gambella region, and the agro-pastoral tribes of the lower Omo valley.

1. Awash River/Afar pastoralists

Awash River currently accounts for 50% of Ethiopia's irrigated land, with one third of the Awash under mechanized irrigated cultivation. But the region is one of the hottest and driest in the world. Given the variable rainfall and periodic drought in this area, Afar pastoralists have historically utilized this area for dry season grazing and water. They were unimpeded until 1960s when Imperial Ethiopian government and international agricultural companies developed irrigated cotton and sugar plantations (Behnke 2013). By 1970s, Afar had lost access to much of the river to upstream hydroelectric power that regulated river flow and to land agricultural companies for development of irrigated cotton and sugar plantations. This began the current trend in Ethiopia to displace pastoral populations and their mobile livestock production system with irrigated crop agriculture.

Middle Awash Agricultural Development Enterprise (MAADE) state owned cotton farms set up in 1969, nationalized under the Derg in 1975, which expanded to 13,000 ha. Ethiopia is not the world's largest cotton producer (China, India, USA, Pakistan have that distinction), but has the fifth largest area of land suitable for cotton production (2.6 million ha). But MAADE was unprofitable for many years, losing farmland to salinity and inflated operating and administrative expenses. By 2009 MAADE shrunk in size, was leased to a private investor, which also slipped in and out of profitability (Behnke 2013: 62-64).

Sugar cane has been equally promoted along the Awash, but also is fraught with economic difficulties. In 1965 the Ethiopian government leased 11,000 ha of land on the Metahara Plains along the Awash River to the Dutch company HVA (Handels Vereniging Amsterdam), who had operated sugar plantations in Shoa since 1964, and which was nationalized under the Derg in 1975. The processing plant crushed 1700 tons of cane per day (TCD) when opened in 1966, reaching 2450 TCD in 1973. The Derg expanded production where by 1981 they plant was processing 5000 TCD. (Girma and Awulachew 2007: 25). As

with cotton, the profits in sugar cane was not in the agriculture, but in processing and export. Nevertheless, sugar is less demanding of land, nutrients, and water than cotton and requires less irrigation. Yet when compared to cattle production, both cotton and sugar are poor economic substitutes. In 2009 and 2010, Metahara produced an average cane yield of 162 tons/ha with net revenue of \$500/ha, which is half as profitable as livestock production on equivalent areas of land (Behnke and Kervan 2013: 65). Behnke and Kervan (2013:66) describe this type of economic activity as 'dysfunctional development - a country investing in making itself poorer.' Nevertheless, the Metahara Sugar Factory, which is now state-owned and taxed, has been highly profitable to the government, yielding \$58 million in 2007-2008. There is no way pastoral production along the Awash would offer a similar amount of money directly into the government's coffers.

For the local pastoralists, sugar cultivation on the Awash has been an unmitigated hardship. Government asserted that nomadic pastoralism may have been productive 30-40 years ago but declined due to increased drought, and it was now necessary to abandon pastoral mobility for settled livestock and crop farming (a doubtful assertion). Meanwhile, the Afar have been denied access to the key riverine resources that they need in order to adapt to variable rainfall levels (Gebre and Kass 2009).

Afar Human Rights Organization (2007) said that in 2005 Ethiopian government proposed expanding sugar cane production over 100,000 ha and with two new factories, with irrigation made possible by two large dams being built in Tandaho and Kassam-Kabana at Sabure. They argue the government has no development program for the Afar except displacement. In addition to denying Afar herders seasonal access to the river, the plants will dump toxic chemicals into the water, the water level will decrease, and will attract up-country highlander populations which will increase ethnic conflict with Afar. Two military posts were recently created to deal with these conflicts, but AHRO claims that they would side with the foreigners. Civil society organizations, including the Afar Pastoralists' Development Association who works with government officials in Afar region, try to mediate as best they can. Nevertheless, accusations have been made that some of the Afar clans are benefitting more for government cooperation than others, accusing some local leaders of collaboration and payoffs with the sugar manufacturers.

2. Gambelle is a region in the far west of Ethiopia with strong ethnic and historical ties to agro-pastoralists of southern Sudan including Nuer (46% of the region's population) and Anuak (21%) people. The region is remote and sparsely populated, not an ideal choice for investors given its predominately hot malarial lowlands coupled with historical ethnic conflict, now made worse as highlanders from the north move into the areas for wage paying jobs associated with dam and irrigation projects. Gambelle region area is fed by two rivers –the Baro and the Akobo (which ultimately flow into the Sobat and White Nile in South Sudan). Gambelle region also holds one of Ethiopia's few but significant oil reserves.

Forested areas along the Baro River have been cleared for irrigation farming, where 300,000 ha have been leased to the Indian company Karuturi Global to produce food crops including maize, wheat and rice. The government hopes Karuturi will employ 25,000 people and produce three million tons of cereal a year. Saudi Star Agricultural Development was leased 10,000 ha for rice production for 60 years rent-free; the company is also prominent in floriculture and other agribusinesses throughout the country. Saudi Star is owned by Saudi/Ethiopian billionaire (12.3 b according to Forbes) Sheikh Mohammed Al Amoudi, whose fortune is based on gold mining, oil production, agriculture, hotels, hospitals, and finance, much of it in Ethiopia. Al-Amoudi was raised in Ethiopia (a Yemeni father and Amhara mother) and though a Saudi citizen, has had close ties to Meles and members of his family and government.

A January 2012 Human Rights Watch report— ‘Waiting Here for Death’: Forced Displacement and ‘Villagization’ in Ethiopia’s Gambella Region,” examines the first year of Gambella’s Villagization program. It details the involuntary nature of the transfers, the loss of livelihoods, the deteriorating food situation, and ongoing abuses by the armed forces against the affected people. Many of the areas from which people are being moved are slated for leasing by the government for commercial agricultural development. HRW asserts the Ethiopian government under its “Villagization” program is forcibly relocating approximately 70,000 indigenous people, mainly Nuer and Anuak people, from the western Gambella region to new villages that lack adequate food, farmland, healthcare, and educational facilities. According to the HRW report, state security forces have repeatedly threatened, assaulted, and arbitrarily arrested villagers who resist the transfers.

3. Omo River/Gibe III Dam

The most widely known and publicized account of pastoral displacement in Ethiopia concerns the impact of large Gibe III dam project on the Omo River located upstream from its vulnerable tribal populations who include Mursi, Dasenech, Hamar, Nyagatom, Hamar, and Bodi peoples. The hydroelectric dam, which is near completion, will produce 1870 MW electric power and cost \$1.7 billion. With the Renaissance Dam project on the Nile (a source of great contention with Egypt), Ethiopia expects to produce 5000 MW of electricity from its hydroelectric plants. The situation of the Omo river peoples, primarily agro-pastoralists who practice flood retreat agriculture, has been publicized mainly by anthropologists who have worked with them for many years including David Turton, and human rights organizations advocating for indigenous people’s rights including Human Rights Watch, Survival International, Cultural Survival, and, more quietly, the South Omo Research Centre located in Jinka and founded by Hamar anthropologist Ivo Strecker.

The Omo valley in SNNPR was designated UNESCO world heritage site in 1980 due to both its cultural and environmental heritage. The Omo populations are small, numbering possibly 90,000 people, The Ethiopian government claims that these populations will benefit from the huge Gibe III dam, arguing that the lower Omo is regularly affected by floods which are seriously destructive of life and property. But David Turton argues in The Downstream Impact that government statements are highly misleading, and the government and international donors did not complete adequate environmental and human impact studies until 2009, when protests from the NGO community and Scandinavian donors forced the government to perform proper studies.

The main beneficiary of the dam, of course, will not be the tribal agro-pastoralists, but the owners of the large irrigated estates, particularly the government who owns the sugar plantations. The current plan intends to convert 150,000 ha (and ultimately 245,000 ha) of river valley forested land to sugar cane production. Most of the generated electricity from the Gibe III is intended for export to Kenya, which the World Bank and African Development Bank are co-funding for ten turbines and the 1000 km transmission lines throughout Kenya. Environmental critics point to grave dangers to the large Lake Turkana ecosystem in northern Kenya, also home to nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoral populations including the Turkana Samburu, and Rendille and Kenyan Dasenech, not to say the location of Koobi Fora hominid research site. Turkana is the largest desert lake in the world, nearly 300 km long, but environmental critics in Kenya predicted that the water level will drop in level 40 meters, silting up the lake and increasing its salinity where it will be undrinkable for camels and other livestock.

Human Rights Watch said in a letter to World Bank President Jim Yong Kim:

“The World Bank shouldn’t think that it’s fine to fund a transmission line while closing its eyes to abuses at the power source, where rights of hundreds of thousands of indigenous people are threatened by the Gibe III dam without protection ”

The Ethiopian Government has consistently defended its position and said alleviating poverty by boosting the national and regional economy is the main target of the government. Ethiopia has not recognized any rights over the land of the indigenous communities of the area, including tenure security, nor has it adequately consulted with let alone sought the consent of indigenous peoples of the Omo, a particular concern given the low levels of education among Omo River populations.

While the Ethiopian government argues the lives of Omo River will improve as they make the switch to irrigated agriculture, the Mursi and Bodi are preparing to fight “to the last man” before they will let the government remove them. But though militant and armed, they are simply too few to defeat the Ethiopian army who will hit hard to ensure the dam and agriculture projects succeed.

4. Borena Plateau (briefly)

Borena pastoralists in southern Oromia region do not face the problems of displacement as other pastoral groups in Ethiopia. They do not have large rivers in their areas, but depend on their remarkable system of boreholes referred to as “the singing wells” (after the echoes of the herders lifting water). Although fully nomadic until quite recently (and indeed all Oromo owe the roots to cattle keeping nomads before 1600), the Borena in southern Ethiopia have adapted to semi-sedentary agro pastoralism for at least the past century, living on small farms while men and take animals to pasture and water in wide areas ranging 100 km or more.

Summary

Ethiopia is on a steady course to increase food production and increase export earning through mechanized and irrigated farming on large private and state owned estates. The majority of these projects are in arid lands historically occupied by mobile pastoral populations. Livestock production is an important sector of Ethiopian economy, yet the government remains ignorant of how those livestock are produced – not on large ranches but by small and independent households. While claiming that pastoral lives will improve with the agricultural modernization, it is not clear how the government will accomplish this with the exception of the oft-repeated idea that they will learn how to farm. It is not clear how these policies will benefit the farming populations of Ethiopia who make up 80% of its population and who farms a bare two hectares of land. The spectacle of modernity is alluring, but outside of increasing the government’s revenues, there is no clear pathway that defines how these revenues will support broad based social and economic development.

But farmers are not being displaced. The current policy of displacement and resettlement of pastoral and agro-pastoral populations in the arid riverine regions is disrupting a delicate balance of survival for many in the region. Human Rights Watch, in its report on Gambella, state “Pastoralists are being forced to abandon their cattle-based livelihoods in favor of settled cultivation. Shifting cultivators – farmers who move from one location to another over the years – are being required to grow crops in a single location, which risks depleting their soil of vital nutrients. In the absence of meaningful infrastructural support and regular supplies of food aid, the changes for both populations may have life-threatening consequences (Human Rights Watch 2012c).

Government movements against pastoralists reveal their deep seated antipathy for the lives and needs of livestock herders. Ato Muhammad Yusuf, an MP and leading voice on pastoralist affairs in the Ethiopian government, told the Ecologist magazine (May 3, 2012):

“Civilisation did not come from pastoralists but from agriculture. They must work on the land to be good citizens.’ Yusuf argues pastoralists need to settle in order for the government to provide them with basic services like healthcare and education and safeguard their future but insists it is only being done voluntarily in the country.”

One thing is certain; lives of pastoralists will be dramatically altered by the current government economic development plans and policies. Fekadu Bayenne of Institute for Agro-Pastoral and Pastoral Studies at Haramaya University remarked to me, during my Fulbright stay in Ethiopia last year,

“Do you think you will see pastoralists in the same situation 100 years from now? Should you? “ Nevertheless, I remain confident that pastoralism – mobile livestock production in arid lands, will continue to present a viable and productive approach to this important sector of the Ethiopian economy.

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Footnotes:

1. 47.5 million cattle, 26 million sheep, 22. million goats, 2 million horses and mules, 5.6 million donkeys, and 1 million camels in 2008/09 (Macdonald and Simon 2010).