

# ETHIOPIA'S PASTORALIST POLICIES: DEVELOPMENT, DISPLACEMENT AND RESETTLEMENT

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## **Abstract**

Ethiopia's current economic plans call for extensive development along its riverine resources in lowland regions, areas typically occupied by pastoral and agro-pastoral peoples. These plans include the development of large dams for hydroelectric power and irrigating large agricultural estates producing sugar, cotton and rice in state-run and privately owned businesses. Nearly all of these projects entail the relocation and resettlement of populations away from the rivers, and threaten the livelihoods and way of life of small but distinct ethnic groups. Although criticised widely by international human rights organisations, the Ethiopian government maintains these developments will ultimately benefit both affected populations and the country as a whole. This paper reviews particular development projects on the Omo River and Awash River and in Gambela Region, and refers to works by NGOs and human rights organisations seeking alternative approaches to resettlement.

KEYWORDS: pastoralism, Ethiopia, land-grabbing, resettlement, Omo River

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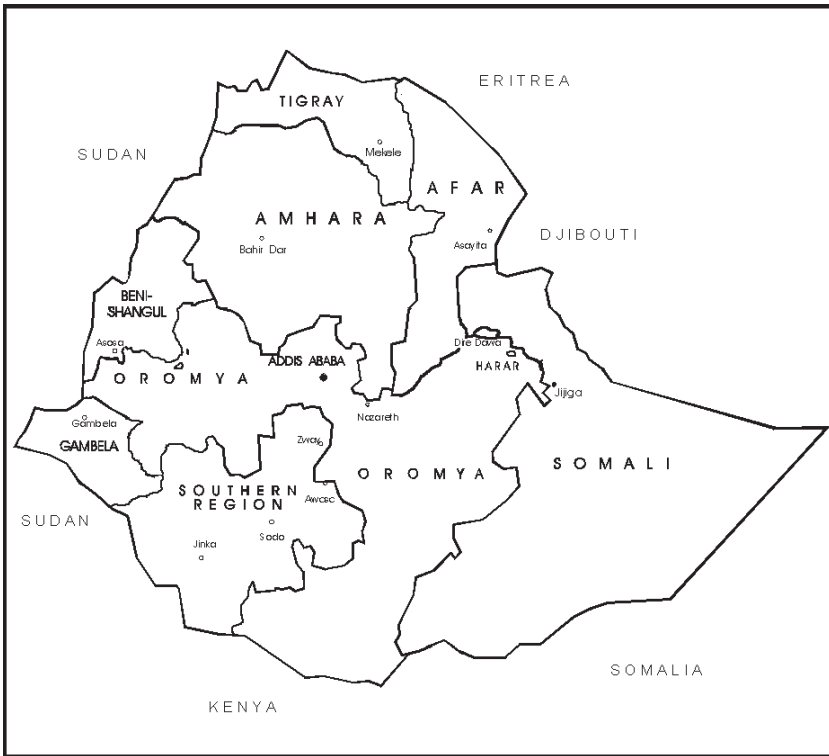
On 21 January 2011, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia addressed the 13th Annual Pastoralist Day Celebrations, held in Jinka, capital of the Southern Omo Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) in the southwest part of the country. This region is home to many of Ethiopia's isolated tribal groups including the Mursi, Bodi, Kara, Dasenech and Hamar peoples who practice agro-pastoralism 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 (Mursi.org 2011).

In the past decade, the Federal Government of Ethiopia has dramatically accelerated the development of large hydroelectric dams and irrigation agriculture estates on the four major rivers – the Omo, Awash and Shabelle Rivers and the proposed Blue Nile Renaissance (or Millennium) Dam. These hydroelectric and irrigation projects are located in lowland regions utilised by pastoral and agro-pastoral societies, which are often small, tribal and disempowered groups with poor education and lacking political access. Several of these large projects call for the relocation and resettlement of peoples residing along the rivers, particularly Omo River tribal groups including the Mursi and Bodi who practise flood-retreat agriculture on the river, and to a lesser degree Kara, Nyangatom, Suri, Hamar and Dasenech people in live in the Omo River Valley in SNNPR (referred to in Map 1 as Southern Region). The Omo River populations number about 200,000, with another 300,000 pastoralist people in Kenya utilising Lake Turkana, which will also be affected by the Omo dams (Oakland Institute 2013a). Other groups threatened by cotton and sugar farms include the Afar (Danakil) and Oromo on the Awash River in Afar Region, Somali on the Shabelle River in Somali Region and Nuer and Anuak agro-pastoralists people in Gambela Region. In addition, Ethiopia is constructing the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (or Millennium Dam) on the Blue Nile River in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region of Ethiopia near the Sudan border. With a projected annual output of 6,000 MW of electricity, the Blue Nile Dam will be the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa when completed. While not in a pastoralist area, its two main ethnic groups affected by the Blue Nile Dam, the Berta and Gumuz, are Arabic speaking minorities with little voice in terms of their own situational outcome (Oakland Institute 2013a).

In the world Meles envisioned, Ethiopia's large rivers will supply the country with hydroelectric power and large irrigated farms producing food crops, both of which will provide foreign revenue. The government makes clear that these large projects are aimed directly at raising the living standard of the second largest country in Africa and one of its poorest (\$1,200 GDP per capita) to levels of self-sufficiency and food security. Ethiopia has seen rapid economic growth in the past decade reaching levels of seven to ten per cent per annum, in no small part due to its irrigation agriculture businesses producing rice, wheat, sugar, flowers and cotton, owned by either the Ethiopian state or leased to investors, local and foreign, the so-called 'land-grabbing' (Castro 2012; Galaty 2013). The government hopes to increase foreign revenues by



**Map 1.** Administrative Regions of Ethiopia

UNDP-EUE PO Box 5580 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia [undp-eue@telecom.net.et](mailto:undp-eue@telecom.net.et) [http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Hornet/eue\\_strp1097.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Hornet/eue_strp1097.html)

the export of electricity, where Kenya and Djibouti are expected to receive much of the energy generated by the Gibe III dam on the Omo River, currently nearing completion.

Meles' policies towards pastoralists constitute some of the most extensive and draconian in Africa, and possibly in the world. Human Rights Watch (HRW) estimated that resettlement will affect 1.5 million people, predominately pastoral and agro-pastoral populations in four lowland regions – 500,000 in Somali region, 500,000 in Afar region, 225,000 in Benishangul-Gumuz and 225,000 in Gambela (Human Rights Watch 2012a: 19–20) – which may now increase by 200,000 with the projected Omo River displacements. Meles passed away suddenly on 20 August 2012 but his government and policies remain in place under Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, at least for now. Although only a

small percentage of Ethiopia's 92 million plus population, pastoralists inhabit 60 per cent of the country's land and produce much of the commercially valuable livestock – 30 per cent or 9.3 million cattle, 52 per cent or 12.4 million sheep, 45 per cent or 8.1 million goats and close to 100 per cent or 1.8 million camels (Little et al. 2010: 1).

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-based regions which he ruled with his own Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party firmly in power. Following the elections of 2005, where EPRDF received only 55 per cent of the vote, Meles suspended opposition parties and newspapers and ruled through a single party. In terms of economic development, Meles did not wholly subscribe to the neo-liberal agenda proposed by international donors, which emphasise privatisation and reductions in government spending in education and health care. He followed his own path, combining state owned enterprises with private local and international investment, much like China, which Meles greatly admired. Ethiopians say Meles kept one foot in the American shoe and the other in China. Through international assistance, as well as government revenues, the government has provided roads, schools and hospitals with relative equality to most regions of the federation.

In July 2001, the World Bank provided a \$500 million loan project that would include a government sponsored project to 'build long-term drought resilience' in the pastoralist regions. 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-centred 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 would resettle, while in the western states of Gambela and Benishangul-Gumuz (north of Gambela) it wanted 450,000 to move into 'modern villages' (Christian Science Monitor 2011). Human Rights Watch, which has been monitoring the relocations, wrote, 'Mass displacement to make way for commercial agriculture in the absence of a proper legal process contravenes Ethiopia's constitution and violates the rights of indigenous peoples under international law.' (Human Rights Watch 2012b)

The government steadily developed its plans for massive hydroelectric producing 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 were confined to these under-populated regions, as Meles's political base had always been, and continues to be, small peasant farmers whose lands are not being appropriated for state farms, as they were under Mengistu, or for agribusinesses. While popular in Ethiopia as a whole, these policies were criticised by international human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, International Rivers and Survival International. In 2009, the European Investment Bank and the African Development Bank withdrew funding for the Gibe III dam project on the Omo River at the urging of two NGOs, Friends of Lake Turkana and International Rivers, which criticised the negative impact on the environment of the project (AfricaOnline 2009). The project proceeded based on a 2010 loan of \$459 million from the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China for the installation of electrical and mechanical equipment for Gibe, and the World Bank agreed to finance the construction of transmission lines to Kenya. (Banktrack.org 2011)

Meles addressed these criticisms 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 (Mursi.org 2011).

In some ways Ethiopia's pastoralist policies have been constructive, particularly when compared to neighboring Kenya and Tanzania. 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 marginalisation (Little et al. 2010; Mulatu and Bekure 2013). Pastoral development policies emerged in part to respond to a decline in mobile practices, where former pastoralists have fallen out of pastoralism production due to increased poverty brought about by climatic, social and political factors. The phenomenon of pastoral sedentarisation has been noted for Kenya and Ethiopia, as well as elsewhere on the continent (Fratkin 2013; Little et al. 2001; McPeak et al. 2011), leading many to seek alternative livelihoods. The Ethiopian government, through regional offices, has planned in genuine consultation a variety of initiatives dealing with effective drought management systems including fodder/food security

strategies, creating a reserve fund, establishing veterinary health systems and mitigating future environmental damage (Gebru et al. 2003).

Despite these legal protections, however, there remain 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, where Ethiopian tenure traditions and agricultural practices both have a strong farming bias and 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 and commercial and conservation value of pastoral land has accelerated pastoral land loss in recent decades.

Ethiopia is not known for buckling under to donors, whether governmental donors or NGOs, and continues its policies of 'encouraging' pastoralists to pursue sedentary lives as farmers. But their government's behaviour has shown that it doesn't have a real alternative to pastoral or agro-pastoral livelihoods currently practised by the pastoralists. And the policies have directly led to displacement of herders and their animals from traditional grazing and water points, some of which is through involuntary resettlement that 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.

According to Human Rights Watch (2012a), since 2008 Ethiopia has leased out at least 3.6 million hectares of land nationally (as of January 2011) to foreign and domestic investors. An additional 2.1 million hectares of land was made available through the federal government's land bank for agricultural investment. In 2012 Human Rights Watch presented two critical reports, one dealing with the involuntary resettlement of agro-pastoralists from Gambela region in the country's west, where 42 per cent of the total land area was marketed for lease to investors, 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 (Human Rights Watch 2012a, 2012c).

I look briefly at three cases of vulnerable indigenous agro-pastoral and pastoral peoples facing severe threats to their way of life: Afar pastoralists in the Awash River valley, Nuer and Anuak in Gambela region and the formerly isolated tribes of the lower Omo valley. Other Ethiopian pastoralists are experiencing problems including the Borana Oromo who face range enclosures in

southern Ethiopia (Tache 2013) and Oromo and Afar negotiating over grazing lands in Afar Region (Beyene 2010), but they do not face the problems of displacement by large agricultural estates as in SNNPR and Gambella. The Shabelle River region in the southeast may be open to foreign investment but current conditions of ethnic conflict and famine are forestalling this (Amnesty International 2013).

### **Awash River and Afar pastoralists**

The Awash River currently accounts for fifty per cent of Ethiopia's irrigated land, with one third of the Awash valley currently under mechanised 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 utilised 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. By 1970s, the 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 (Rettberg 2010).

Roy Behnke and Carol Kerven (2013) trace the history of large cotton farms along the Awash, which began in the 1960s and led to the establishment of the state-owned Middle Awash Agricultural Development Enterprise (MAADE) under the Selassie regime in 1969, nationalised under the Derg in 1975, which expanded production to 13,000 ha. Ethiopia is not the world's largest cotton producer – China, India, the USA and Pakistan have that distinction- but it has the fifth largest area of land suitable for cotton production (2.6 million ha). MAADE was unprofitable for many years, losing farmland to salinity and inflated operating and administrative expenses. By 2009 MAADE was leased to a private investor, which also slipped in and out of profitability (Behnke and Kerven 2013: 62–64).

Sugar cane has been equally promoted along the Awash, but is also 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), which had operated sugar plantations in Shoa since 1964, was nationalised under the Derg in 1975 and remains state-owned today. The processing plant crushed 1,700 tons of cane per day (TCD) when opened in 1966, reaching 2,450 TCD in 1973. The Derg expanded production so that by 1981 they plant was processing 5,000 TCD (Girma and

Awulachew 2007: 25). But profits in sugar cane, like cotton, are not in the agriculture but in processing and export. Sugar growing is attractive as it is less demanding of land, nutrients and water than cotton and requires less irrigation. Yet, as Behnke and Kerven argue, both cotton and sugar are poor economic substitutes when compared to cattle production. 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 Kerven 2013: 65). Behnke and Kerven (2013: 66) describe this type of economic activity as 'dysfunctional development – a country investing in making itself poorer'. Nevertheless, the state-owned Metahara Sugar Factory has been highly profitable to the government, yielding \$58 million in 2007–2008. Although pastoral production is more profitable, it does not contribute revenue directly into the government's coffers.

For the local pastoralists, sugar cultivation on the Awash has been an unmitigated hardship. The government asserted that nomadic pastoralism may have been productive thirty or forty years ago but declined due to increased drought and it was now necessary to abandon pastoral mobility for settled livestock and crop farming. 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 Kassa 2009). In 2005, the Ethiopian government proposed expanding sugar cane production to over 100,000 ha, with two new factories and irrigation made possible by two large dams. The Afar Human Rights Organization (AHRO 2012) argues that the government has no development programme for the Afar except displacement. In addition to denying Afar herders seasonal access to the river, the plantations are dumping toxic chemicals into the water, the water level is decreasing and migrants from the highlands are benefiting from job opportunities not available to the less educated Afar. This has increased ethnic conflict with the Afar and, while two military posts were recently created to deal with these conflicts, AHRO claims that they typically side with the upcountry foreigners. Civil society organisations, including the Afar Pastoralists Development Association who work 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 from government cooperation than others, accusing some local leaders of collaboration and payoffs with the sugar manufacturers.

## **Gambela Region**

Gambela (also spelled Gambella) is a region in the far west of Ethiopia with strong ethnic and historical ties to agro-pastoralists of southern Sudan



including Nuer (46 per cent of the region's population) and Anuak (21 per cent). Gambela is fed by two rivers – the Baro and the Akobo (which ultimately flow into the Sobat and White Nile in South Sudan); in the past five years the government has opened up large areas along the river to private commercial interests for irrigated rice, oil palm, cotton and sugar production. (Gambela region also holds one of Ethiopia's few but significant oil reserves). The region is remote and sparsely populated and would not appear an ideal choice for investors, given its predominately hot and malarial lowlands. Nevertheless, 42 per cent of the entire region has been leased to private and foreign investors for the estates (Human Rights Watch 2012a). Historically there has been ethnic conflict with immigrants from the highlands, now made worse as highlanders move into the area for wage paying jobs associated with the dam and irrigation projects.

In 2010, the Indian company Karuturi Ltd. leased 130,000 ha (ultimately reaching 300,000 ha), to produce food crops including maize, wheat and rice. In 2012 they created a palm oil nursery on a 20,000 ha irrigated plantation. Much of the forested areas along the Baro River have been cleared for irrigation farming and local populations who traditionally practiced sorghum agriculture and cattle pastoralism have been relocated, voluntarily according to government spokesmen, or by force according to human rights groups. The government expects Karuturi Ltd. to employ 25,000 people and produce three million tons of cereal a year. Many of these jobs will go to migrants from the crowded highlands of the north, with whom local Nuer and Anuak have had conflict with in the past. In 2012 the Gambella Saudi Star Rice Development Company was leased 10,000 ha for rice production for sixty years rent-free; the company is prominent in floriculture and other agribusinesses throughout the country. The construction of the irrigation infrastructure will cost \$89 million, and includes the construction of dam, a 30 km canal and a 21 km tunnel connecting the dam to the farm, according to the Gambella Star website (Gambella Star News 2012). Saudi Star is owned by Saudi/Ethiopian billionaire 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 (his father was a Yemeni and mother Amhara) and, though a Saudi citizen, has had close ties to Meles and members of his family and government.

To accommodate the development of these large commercial farms in Gambela, the government initiated a 'Villagisation' program to relocate local residents from their riverine locations. In January 2012, Human Rights Watch released a 119 page report "'Waiting Here for Death": Forced Displacement and "Villagization" in Ethiopia's Gambella Region', which examined the first year of the Villagisation 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. Human Rights Watch asserted the Ethiopian government was forcibly relocating approximately 70,000 indigenous people, mainly Nuer and Anuak people, 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 (Human Rights Watch 2012a).

Human Rights Watch asserted that, despite pledges to provide suitable compensation, the government has provided insufficient resources to sustain people in the new villages. The residents of Gambella, mainly indigenous Anuak and Nuer, have never had formal title to the land they have lived on and used. The government often claims that the areas are 'uninhabited' or 'under-utilised'. That claim enables the government to bypass constitutional provisions and laws that would protect these populations from being relocated. According to HRW, the report is based on more than 100 interviews in Ethiopia in May and June 2011 and at the Ifo refugee camp in Dadaab and Nairobi, Kenya, where many Gambelans have fled (Human Rights Watch 2012b).

The HRW report asserted that the Ethiopian government planned to resettle 1.5 million people by 2013 in four regions: Gambela, Afar, Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz. Relocations started in 2010 in Gambela and approximately 70,000 people there were scheduled to be moved by the end of 2011. The plan pledged to provide infrastructure for the new villages and assistance to ensure alternative livelihoods. The plan also stated that the movements were to be voluntary.

Instead of improved access to government services, however, new villages often go without them altogether. The first round of forced relocations occurred at the worst possible time of year – the beginning of the harvest – and many of the areas to which people were moved are dry with poor-quality soil. The nearby land needs to be cleared, and agricultural assistance – seeds and fertilizers – has not been provided. The government failure to provide food assistance for relocated people has caused endemic hunger and cases of starvation (Human Rights Watch 2012b).

According to the report, pastoralists in Gambela were being forced to abandon their cattle-based livelihoods in favour of settled cultivation, and shifting cultivators were being required to grow crops in a single location, which risks depleting their soil of vital nutrients. Human Rights Watch said that, in the absence of meaningful infrastructural support and regular supplies of food aid, the changes for both populations would have life-threatening consequences. The resident of one new village told HRW in 2012: 'We expect major starvation next year because they did not clear in time. If they [the government] cleared

[the land] we would have food next year but now we have no means for food.’ (Human Rights Watch 2012b).

The Ethiopian government objected strenuously to the HRW Gambela report and expelled Human Rights Watch from the country in 2012. In an interview with Radio Netherlands, Ethiopian authorities rejected the report,

‘Villagization programs are key to the country’s development ... We simply, outrightly reject this allegation’, government spokesman Bereket Simon told AFP. ‘In Gambella as elsewhere we have ensured the safety of our people. We have improved the livelihoods of 20,000 people through resettlement programs’, he said, adding that health clinics, schools, houses and roads have been built for relocated communities. Bereket said an additional 3.4 million hectares of land are slated to be released to investors, not 2.1 million hectares as HRW reported. ‘We will not stop it, we will not back off our development plan’, he said (Radio Netherlands Worldwide 2012).

In February 2013, the non-profit Oakland Institute based in the USA issued a report, ‘Unheard Voices: The Human Rights Impact of Land Investments on Indigenous Communities in Gambella’, which included local Gambela NGOs Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia and Anywaa Survival Organization. The report said,

To make way for agricultural investment, and through its so-called villagization program, the Ethiopian government has forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of indigenous people from their lands. This relocation process has destroyed livelihoods. It has rendered small-scale farmers and pastoralist communities dependent on food aid and fearful for their own survival. Ethiopian officials have also beaten, arrested, and intimidated individuals who have refused to comply with relocation policies. These actions are in direct contravention of Ethiopia’s obligations under international human rights law (Oakland Institute 2013a: 5).

Responding to complaints by both human rights organisations and local ‘project affected people’, the World Bank Inspection Panel launched an investigation in July 2013 to determine whether the Bank had breached its policies in Ethiopia and contributed to a government programme of forced population transfers. The Bank’s move followed the resolution of a five-month standoff with the Ethiopian government, which had publicly threatened in May not to cooperate with the investigation. In a submission accompanying the complaint, the NGO Inclusive Development International (2013) wrote,

The Inspection Panel complaint alleged that the Anuak people have suffered grave harm as a result of the World Bank-financed Promoting Basic Services Project (PBS), which has provided \$ 1.4 billion in budget support for the provision of basic services to the Ethiopian Government since

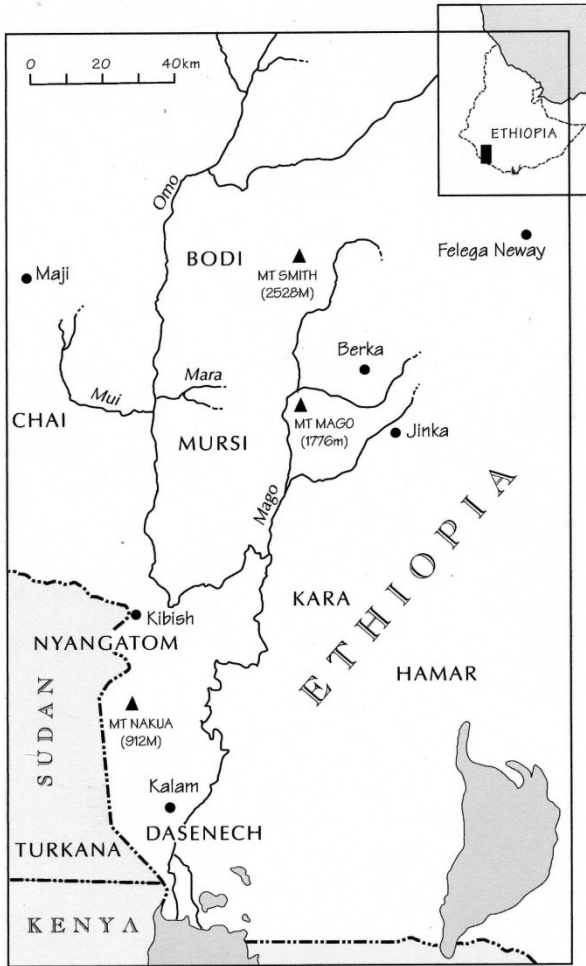
2006. The Bank approved an additional \$600 million for the next phase of the project on September 25th – one day after the complaint was filed. A legal submission accompanying the complaint, prepared by Inclusive Development International (IDI), presents evidence that the PBS project is directly and substantially contributing to the Ethiopian Government's Villagization Program, which has been taking place in Gambella and other regions of Ethiopia since 2010 and involves the relocation of approximately 1.5 million people (Inclusive Development International 2013).

Human Rights Watch asserted that mass displacement to make way for commercial agriculture in the absence of a proper legal process contravened Ethiopia's constitution and violated the rights of indigenous peoples under international law (Human Rights Watch 2012b). The Ethiopian government refused to cooperate with the World Bank Inspection Panel investigation, which is currently stalemated. (Bloomberg News 2013).

### **Omo River/Gibe III dam**

One of the most serious threats of pastoral displacement as well as environmental degradation is the construction of the Gilgel Gibe III dam on the Omo River in southwest Ethiopia, one of five large dam projects on the river (Gilgel Gibe is the name of an upper tributary of the Omo). Gibe I and II are completed, Gibe III is about 75 per cent complete; and Gibe IV and V are in various stages of construction. The southern Omo Valley is home to a number of tribal groups who depend on the river for flood retreat agriculture and cattle pastoralism. The Omo River valley is one of the most isolated areas in Ethiopia, and was designated in 1980 as a UNESCO world heritage site due to both its cultural and environmental heritage. The lower Omo populations are small and tribal based agro-pastoralists, numbering possibly 200,000 people, and include Bodi, Chai (Suri), Mursi, Kwegu, Nyangatom, Kara, Dasanech and Hamar. These groups rely on the 760-km long Omo River for growing crops and replenishing grazing land during annual flooding each July–September (Human Rights Watch 2012c). The Mursi and Bodi, who live along the river and practice flood-retreat cultivation with cattle pastoralism, are the most threatened as they stand to be resettled away from the river and their traditional livelihoods (Turton 2010).

Gilgel Gibe III is part of a five dam project owned by the Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation. At \$1.7 billion, Gibe III dam is the largest infrastructure project in Ethiopia, and, will produce 1870 MW electric power and, in conjunction with the proposed Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile, will produce 5000 MW, making Ethiopia the largest energy producer in Africa. About fifty per



Map 2. Omo River Tribes (Turton 2010)

cent of the power will be exported to Kenya, Djibouti and Sudan via overland transmission lines and is expected to bring in \$407 million income each year, well above Ethiopia's largest foreign revenue earner of coffee (International Rivers 2011).

The Gibe III dam will dramatically alter the Omo River's flood cycle, affecting ecosystems and local livelihoods, and ultimately destroy the local food security and economy. In addition, the dwindling of resources caused by

the dam is likely to increase local conflicts between ethnic groups (International Rivers 2013). Of direct hardship to local populations is the government's intention of converting 150,000 ha (and ultimately 245,000 ha) of river valley forested land into large state owned irrigated sugar plantations and converting more land to private crop production of rice and sugar.

Turton (2010) argued that the government and international donors did not complete adequate environmental and human impact studies until 2009, when protests from the NGO community including Human Rights Watch, International Rivers and Survival International forced the government to perform proper environmental impact studies. Major donors pulled back from the project: the dam was initially funded by the European Investment Bank (IEB) in 2006 with construction bid going to the Italian company Salini Costruttori. The Ethiopian government received additional funding from the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the World Bank, but the IEB and World Bank withdrew from the construction project in 2010 at the urging of the NGOs; the African Development Bank has delayed its decision about a loan pending a review of the dam's environmental impact which NGOs called for in August 2009 (Survival International 2012). Prime Minister Meles vowed in 2010 to keep the project going, saying about the critics of the dam, 'They don't want to see developed Africa; they want us to remain undeveloped and backward to serve their tourists as a museum.' (Guardian 2011) In 2012 the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) took over the construction of the turbines and the World Bank agreed to fund the electric transmission lines including 1000 km to Kenya (Africa-Europe Faith and Justice Network 2013).

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. The government intends to resettle Mursi and Bodi along two canals which run 200 km on either side of the river, where they can engage in irrigation agriculture. According to a recent report, evictions have already begun, accompanied by a resettlement villagisation programme, which, 'although described by administrators as "voluntary", is forced in the sense that those affected have no reasonable alternative but to comply' (ThinkAfricaPress 2014). The main beneficiary of the dams, of course, will not be the tribal agro-pastoralists but the owners of the large irrigated estates, particularly the government, which owns the sugar plantations. Unofficial reports indicate cases of violent conflicts between government forces and armed members of the Bodi and Mursi communities, who vow to resist rather than give up their way of life and food production strategy (DGR News Service 2013; Guardian 2012).

Human Rights Watch (2012d) 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) the rights of hundreds of thousands of indigenous people threatened by the Gibe III dam need to be protected.

A major criticism of the Gibe III project is its pronounced environmental impacts, which will drastically alter the region's ecosystem. The Lower Omo River provides ninety per cent of the water to Lake Turkana in Kenya, which at 290 km in length is the largest desert lake in the world. Lake Turkana supports another 300,000 people, including pastoral Turkana, Samburu, Rendille, Gabra and Dasenech of Kenya. The construction of the Gibe dams will ultimately reduce the lake levels by significant amounts and contribute to increased salinity, destroying its biotic ecosystem and affecting plants, wildlife and domestic herds that depend on the lake (Avery 2013). 'Hundreds of thousands of fishing families and livestock farmers would be affected if the lake's fragile ecosystem were stressed to the brink of collapse' (Africa-Europe Faith and Justice Network 2013). In June 2011 UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, in its 35th session held in Paris, France, called for the construction of the dam to be halted and requested Ethiopia and Kenya to invite a World Heritage Centre/IUCN monitoring mission to review the dam's impact on Lake Turkana. Neither the Ethiopian or Kenyan government responded to this request (Berhane 2011).

Opponents of the population displacement have called on Ethiopia to acknowledge the indigenous rights of the Omo peoples affected by the dam, Human Rights Watch (2012e) wrote,

Indigenous peoples have property rights over the land they have historically occupied that must be recognized by the state, and they can only be displaced with their free, prior, and informed consent. Even when such consent is given, they must also be fully compensated for any loss of land, property, or livelihood.

Like many countries in the developing world, Ethiopia maintains that land rights belong to the government, although people have traditional usufruct rights to farm and graze their livestock. Ethiopia has not recognised any rights over the land of the indigenous communities, including tenure security, nor has it adequately consulted with, nor sought the consent of, indigenous peoples of the Omo, a particular concern given the low levels of education among Omo River populations. The Oakland Institute (2013a: 9) argues that Ethiopia has formally signed a number of human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant



on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), as well as conventions protecting the rights of children and women. Ethiopia did not sign the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but was recorded 'absent' along with 35 other countries in the developing world. (Four countries voted against UNDRIP: The United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia) (United Nations 2014). Ethiopia claims that the rights of indigenous peoples are addressed by their own laws and constitution, including protection of pastoral land use.

The Ethiopian Government has consistently defended its policies to develop hydroelectric power and create irrigated agricultural schemes on the Omo River, saying it is alleviating poverty by boosting the national and regional economy. While the Ethiopian government argues the lives of Omo River people 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 although militant and armed, these tribal groups are simply too small to defeat the Ethiopian army who will hit hard to ensure the dam and agriculture projects succeed (Oakland Institute 2013b: 5).

## Conclusion

Ethiopia is on a steady course of development, with far-reaching plans to develop its hydroelectric power and increase food production and increase export revenue earning through mechanised 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 some of whom, in Gambela, Afar and the Omo River, are threatened with displacement and resettlement in foreign and unproductive environments. Livestock production is a leading 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 (Little et al. 2010). While claiming that pastoral lives will improve with the agricultural modernisation, 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 eighty per cent of its population, cultivating two hectares of land per household. 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.



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 writes,

The impact of these forcible transfers has been far greater than the normal challenges associated with adjusting to a new location. Shifting cultivators – farmers who move from one location to another over the years – are being required to plant crops in a single location. Pastoralists are being forced to abandon their cattle-based livelihoods in favor of settled cultivation. In the absence of meaningful infrastructural support, the changes for both populations may have life-threatening consequences (Human Rights Watch 2012c: 3).

Government movements against pastoralists reveal their deep-seated antipathy towards 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 (*Ecologist* 2012).

One thing is certain, the lives of pastoralists will be dramatically altered by the current government economic development plans and policies. During my stay in Ethiopia as a US Fulbright Scholar in 2011–12, an Ethiopian scientist who has worked extensively with pastoralists asked me, ‘Do you think you will see pastoralists in the same situation one hundred years from now? Should you?’ Other faculty members at my university also said of the Omo River displacements, ‘This is the way of progress. It may hurt this generation, but all will benefit in the future.’

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