

Ethiopia: Contested Resource Extraction Narratives in Gambella's Midroc Rice Development Project

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This paper was originally presented at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, San Francisco

March 31/ 2015



The 9 regional states (kilils) of Ethiopia

Introduction

The conflict between indigenous communities on one hand and governments, multinational companies and international financial institutions on the other, has persisted in resource extraction frontiers in Africa, South America and Asia. This research examines the conflict between the indigenous populations of the Gambela region in western Ethiopia and Midroc's Horizon giant rice development project. The Ethiopian state has been promoting a multidimensional effort to grow the national economy, decentralize development and transform the country into a middle-income one by 2025. The first 5-year Growth and Transformation Plan that ended in 2014 is believed to have laid the foundation for the realization of the Grand National development vision. Since 2005, Ethiopia has been reported as having experienced double digit annual rate of economic growth (9-11%) making it the fastest growing economy in Sub-Saharan Africa. The transformation has manifested itself in agriculture, industry, education, health care, transportation and communication, housing and urban development, energy, finance etc.

The development process has been driven by both endogenous forces and the contributions of the international community in the form of foreign direct investment, loans, grants, trade and institution building. In particular, the role of China, Diaspora investments and remittances, loans from the World Bank, African Development Bank, The European Development Bank etc. have been significant. The US and UK have been important contributors to the provision of funds for basic services (The Guardian, 2015). It is now the 4th largest Sub-Saharan economy after Nigeria, South Africa and Angola. The economic growth is taking place amid fast population growth and the attendant challenges that come with it in the form of food insecurity, increased demand for employment, services and resources. There have also been widespread allegations that the ruling party and its key functionaries have been engaged in massive corruption and state capture amid worsening unemployment and cost of living for the majority of the Ethiopian people.

One of the most significant economic development initiatives of the government has been in availing land to foreign investors at exceptionally favorable terms. The tensions that have arisen between important stakeholders in agricultural resource extraction projects in Gambella, Western Ethiopia have been explained differently by concerned stakeholders. The narratives of the investor, Horizon Plantation and other important stakeholders, namely, the Ethiopian state, the indigenous population, civil society organizations and international finance institutions have been examined in this research in order to provide the reader with an understanding of the scope and nature of the problem. The strategy of private/public partnership has been widely recognized as one of the means by which resource frontiers and marginalized communities could improve economic production, enhance social well-being and protect the environment. One of the key areas of conflicts between the various stakeholders revolves around the land rights and participation of indigenous communities in making critical policy and operational decisions on the design and implementation of resource extraction projects (Sawyer and Gomez, 2014)

The vast Gambella plains are found in Southwestern Ethiopia (see map) and provide livelihood to an indigenous population estimated at 307,000 (2007). Midroc's Horizon Plantation is developing a 10,000-hectare rice plantation using the Alwero earth dam that had been built in the 1980s by Ethiopia's former friend and ideological partner, the Soviet Union. The Alwero dam was built with the vision of transforming the backward resource frontier into a supplier of agricultural raw materials for the country's agricultural and industrial development. The fall of the Military government in 1991 put an end to the huge irrigated agricultural development project. The resumption of commercial agricultural activity at the Alwero dam site and its surroundings under Midroc's Horizon agriculture development enterprise has drawn the wrath of indigenous population groups, civil society organizations and opposition political groups representing the indigenous populations. These stakeholders have leveled accusations against federal, state and local authorities and the investor, Horizon plantation for complicity in the massive displacement, abuse and human rights violations of the local population (Oakland Institute, 2013, 2015; the Guardian, 2015; Sava Shavkin, 2015; William Davison, 2015).

Indigenous populations of the area have long expressed their opposition to the migration of highlanders into what they consider to be their traditional/cultural land right and territorial cultural identity. Successive governments have taken upon themselves the mission of 'civilizing' backward areas through regional transformation projects like agricultural plantations, infrastructures, institution building, tourism and military presence. Like in many resource frontier areas all over the world, indigenous populations have been torn between the rhetoric of modern development and its purported social, economic, infrastructural and institutional benefits on one hand and the traditional values of unrestricted access, use and control of land that has belonged to them historically. This ambivalence was clearly expressed on June 22/2015 through an Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation development report in the Omo basin of Southwestern Ethiopia. Some of interviewed members of the indigenous populations noted that state and investor-sponsored development activities had brought about significant benefits to the population in the form of improved access to clean water, schools, health services and roads. At the same time, the report did not hide the fact that there had been tensions between the government and indigenous population groups with the unrest claiming lives and creating insecurity in the region. The narrative of development benefitting the local population and transforming the primitive economic and socio-cultural landscape into a more 'civilized' one was orchestrated by the program throughout its broadcast (Ethiopian TV, June 22 program on the Omo basin Development). Research on the experiences of indigenous peoples in more developed countries of the world suggests that few benefit economically from the extraction of their resources and few participate in decision-making processes and most are underrepresented in employment in the resource extraction projects (Davis Megan, 2014).

The tensions and contested development narratives of the indigenous peoples of Gambella, the transnational corporate investors and the state facilitators should be analyzed from different constructions of who has the regulatory and control powers over land and resources in Ethiopia. Land has been the property of the state since the former military government nationalized all rural land and extra urban houses in 1975. The perception that indigenous population groups have ‘deeply lived attachments’ (Sawyer and Gomez, 2014, p16) to their land and hence the right of control over its use and management cannot strictly apply in the current political economy conditions of Ethiopia. Like in any other part of Ethiopia, the people of Gambella have no special ownership right to land and related resources by claiming historical political agency as communal, equitable and sustainable communities. Successive central governments have intervened in indigenous communities and imposed their modernist development agenda by appropriating land for commercial pursuits. The many state and private state farms in the Awash Valley, the rift valley (Afar kilil), Guraferda, Tepi in Oromia kilil, etc bear vivid testimony to this reality.

The Federal government of Ethiopia has given vast areas of agricultural land in resource frontier areas such as the Awash valley, Baro-Akobo basin and the Omo basin in the Southwest to develop modern agricultural plantations that produce, sugar, cotton, rice, and other commodities for both domestic use and export (William Davison, 2015, David Smith, April 14/2015).

The effort has attracted opposition from indigenous population groups and international human rights advocates who have accused the government of putting undue pressure on local populations to accommodate the interests of multinational corporations, local investors and different layers of government. This project is a good example of the notion of ‘contested development’ in which the Ethiopian state is viewed as a facilitator for multinational investors’ capture of land in resource extraction frontiers without the consent and participation of indigenous populations who lay claim on the land and resources of their traditional environment. The rather intransigent and rigid position of the state regarding the opening-up of such resource frontiers to foreign and local investors has been met with allegations of state violence and abuse of indigenous populations (Oakland Institute, 2013, 2015; The Guardian, 2015; Sava Shaskin, 2015).

Likewise, the government has accused indigenous opposition groups as obstructionists and mouthpieces of anti-peace and anti-development political opposition groups in the Diaspora and inside the country. It has linked such opposition groups with ideologically-driven civil society organizations and terrorists who are bent on inciting the people in the Gambella plains and other resource extraction frontier areas to oppose the government’s modernization and transformation plan. It attributes the death of both migrant highlander populations and indigenous population groups and insecurity in the region to the terrorist strategies of opposition groups. It accuses opposition groups as standing against the basic objectives and goals of transforming the lives of the indigenous populations and promoting national development (CEO interview; David Smith, April 14/2015). The development initiatives of the government in the Gambella plains and other resource frontier areas have been constructed as transformational bringing knowhow, technology, jobs, food security, export revenues to the region and the nation at large (Davison, William, 2015; Ministry of Agriculture, 2015). The systematic analysis of the contestations of the different stakeholders of the Horizon rice development project in Gambella, western Ethiopia highlights the complex dynamics between the state, the investor, indigenous populations, international financial institutions and civil society and advocacy groups.

The methodological tools employed in this study include semi-structured interviews, archival research and personal engagement in the regions’ development in the 1980s.

I had the opportunity to conduct a semi-structured interview with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Midroc’s Horizon Plantations at his office in Addis Ababa on June 26/2015. The interview revolved around the 10, 000 ha rice development project that Horizon Plantations of Midroc PLC was developing near Gambella town. A wide range of topics were covered including the conceptualization, planning and implementation phases of the project. While the focus of this research is the narrative of the developer, I have also captured the salient features of the narratives of the government, indigenous populations and civil society organizations using archival research. I had also a unique opportunity of meeting the owner of a 1000 ha cotton farm near Gambella and discussing the operational challenges of running a farm in the region. My knowledge of the area from my engagement as a physical planner in the office of the National Committee for Central Planning in the mid-1980s has provided me historical reference to the dynamics of change in the region.

The numerous visits that I had made to the site both as a physical planner and urban manager have rendered me useful references for the current dynamics of change taking place in the region.

The paper is divided into five sections. After the introduction, section 2 provides a synoptic geographical profile of the Gambella region. Section 3 briefly highlights some of the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the discourse on indigeneity and resource extraction in indigenous communities. Section 4 discusses the narratives of different stakeholders with an emphasis on the chief executive officer of Horizon Plantations Gambella rice development project. The 5th section summarizes the findings of the study and makes a series of recommendations for undertaking a democratic, inclusive and successful development of the hitherto underutilized resource frontier.

Study Area - Geographical Profile

The Gambella region is found in the southwestern extremity of Ethiopia and extends approximately from latitudes 6° 30' 8° 30' N and longitudes of 33-35° east. It borders the Republic of South Sudan in the West. Since 1991, it has been designated as one of the 9 regional states that form the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Most of the region lies at an elevation of 500-600 meters above sea level with some parts of the north and east rising to as high as 2000 meters. The elevation declines to about 300 m along the South Sudanese border. It is drained by the Baro, Akobo and Gilo rivers which eventually flow into the White Nile in Southern Sudan. The soils of the region range from poorly to well-drained ones (TesfayeAwas, Tamrat Bekele and Sebsibe Demisew, 2001. p. 45).

The region is dominated by a tropical rainy climate with the escarpments of Eastern Gambella receiving more rainfall than the drier lowlands along the Sudanese border. A single maximum rainfall regime running from Feb/Mar to Oct/Nov characterizes the region. Annual rainfall averages about 600 mms. Mean temperatures vary from 35 to 40 degrees C over most parts. Along the higher eastern escarpments, mean maximum temperature reaches 27-32 degrees C. Deciduous woodlands, riverine forest and tropical grassland dominate the natural vegetation. The 5, 061 sq. km Gambella national park is found in the region. (ibid)



Gambella-relative location in Western Ethiopia



General Relief pattern

Recession river side cultivation of maize and sorghum is practiced along the rivers Baro, Gilo and Akobo by the mainly sedentary Anyuaa (Anuak) while pasoralist livestock rearing activities dominate the drier western part (Abraham Sewonet. 2003).

The population of the region was estimated at 307, 000 in 2007. The dominant indigenous ethnic groups include the Nuer (40%), the Anyuaa (Anuak) (27%) and the Mezenger (6%). Highlander populations that have settled in the region include the Amhara (8%), Southern Nations and Nationalities (8%), Oromos (6%), Tigrayans (2%). A refugee population estimated at between 150, 000 and 350,000 is found along the Ethiopian and South Sudanese border. The region has one of the lowest fertility rates (4) of the country; a child mortality rate of 70/1000 and an infant mortality rate of 92/1000 (Gambella Star News.Gambella Profile

<http://gambellastarnews.com/index.php?option> accessed 9/16/2015; AynalemAdugna. Ethiopian Demography and Health <http://www.ethiodemographyandhealth.org/Garr>)



Female cultural troupe

Male musical group

Gambella is a sparsely settled region with only 307,000 people (2007 estimate) over an area of 25, 800 sq. kms of mostly moist and fertile land. The hot and inhospitable climate and environmental hazards such as tropical diseases and frequent flooding and government neglect have limited the region's agricultural and overall development dynamics. The history of modern development of the region has been accompanied by the migration of highlanders into the sparsely populated and largely undeveloped region. This migration of largely Semetic and Cushitic highlanders into the area has been a major socio-economic and cultural challenge for the mainly Nilotic indigenous population (Feyissa, Dereje, 2010).

Interethnic conflict has been a historical problem in the region. The Anyuaa (Anuak) consider the majority Nuer stateless nomadic pastoralists who change their allegiances opportunistically. The failure of the central government to protect the Anyuaa from the nomadic pastoralist and stateless Nuer is viewed as the primary cause of the problems associated with regional security. Frequent clashes between Anuaks and Nuers have characterized the security condition of the region. In February 2016, many people died due such conflicts (Davison, William, Bloomberg News. 2016. "Ethnic Clashes in Ethiopia's Gambella kill dozens, official says" <http://nazret.com/blog/index.php/2016/02/02/ethnic-clashes-in-ethiopia-s>). Likewise the increased migration of 'condescending' highlanders to the Gambella region is viewed as the product of the racist framework of Ethiopia's historic national identity that sees them as second-class citizens. (Dereje, Feyissa, 2010; Lewison, M W 2010). The opening up of the Gambella region to modern development and the growing political, economic, cultural and environmental tensions in the area needs to be analyzed within the framework of these socio-economic and cultural realities.

The Gambella rice development project is one of several large scale commercial agricultural development projects that have been leased to Midroc PLC by the Ethiopian government. In a bid to transform the country into a middle income one by 2025, the Ethiopian government has enthusiastically promoted a neoliberal agenda of mobilizing the resources of both external and internal investors for large-scale commercial farming. The hitherto underdeveloped and largely unutilized or underutilized lands in the Awash Valley, the Omo Valley and Gambella Plains have seen the influx of large-scale transnational commercial agriculture projects. The Saudi Star Agricultural Company of Midroc PLC has taken over 10,000 ha for rice development with a future option of expanding its operation on an additional 290,000 hectares. The lease of the 10,000 hectares was made for 60 years at a cost of 158 birr/ha/yr. (Martin W Lewison, March 24, 2010).

It had recently added another 4,000 hectares by buying an adjacent farm (Burgis Tom, March 16, 2016) The Indian company Karuturi Global had struck a deal with the government to lease a vast area of 130 000 hectares in Gambella and 10, 000 ha in Bako for phased development. It had plans to grow and process corn, sugarcane and palm oil. It had already set up a palm oil development venture to support a 20, 000 ha farm in the future (Future Water, 2010)

On December 28/2015, the Land Investment Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture cancelled the company's 2010 lease because of insufficient activity on the leased site. The government accused Karuturi Global of developing only 1,200 hectares when the agreement stipulated the development of 100,000 hectares in two years. The investor was apparently forewarned by the government in 2012 about the insufficient progress that it was making in developing the site. Karuturi had countered that it had invested over 100 million dollars in clearing 65,000 ha and building a 100-km dyke system to control annual floods. The developer complained that the government did not provide a final map of the concession; effectively blocked \$180 million of financing by enacting a cereal-export ban and prevented diesel from reaching the site on security grounds

(<http://nazret.com/blog/index.php/201601/11/karuturi-challenges-ethiopia-decision-to>).

Since 2010, Midroc's Horizon Plantation had developed 7,500 ha of land (6000 ha to be either flood irrigated or rain-fed; 4000 ha supplementary irrigation). It had constructed a 31-km main canal and two branch canals to irrigate 3 000 ha. It had expended over 220 million US dollars for land clearing and preparation; construction of necessary infrastructures and services; purchase of machinery and equipment; and manpower development and management (CEO interview). A March 2016 report on farm activities indicated that the farm had produced about 5,000 tons of rice, employing a 4,000-strong staff that included 1300 locals (300 on permanent contracts and 1000 seasonal laborers) (Burgis Tom, Financial Times Ltd. March 16, 2016)

The Gambella rice development project is part of a broader national agricultural development program that aims at promoting sustained economic growth by increasing agricultural production, reducing poverty, protecting the environment and managing the rational utilization of the natural resources of the country. Both ADLI (Agriculture Development Led Industrialization) and the current Agricultural Growth Program (AGP) have expressed the government's firm support for external and domestic investors in agriculture. In 2013, The ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development established the Agricultural Investment Land Administration Agency (Council of Ministers regulation no. 283/2013) to facilitate agricultural investment and easy access to land for investors. Both federal and regional governments were tasked with the responsibility of working together to upgrade infrastructure, ensure the supply of labor, and review policies and strategies to increase their instrumentality in attracting private investment in agriculture. The Ministry of Agriculture's Agricultural Growth program (AGP) has three broad components, namely: increasing agricultural production and commercialization, small scale rural infrastructure development and management and program management, monitoring and evaluation (Ministry of Agriculture, Agricultural Growth Program) (<http://Ethioagp.org/769/>)



Horizon's rice field in Gambella



Karuturi's corn farm in Gambella

Conceptual Issues on Indigeneity and Resource Extraction

In an overwhelmingly agricultural economy and society, land is the most important source of livelihood and socio-economic and political identity. Changes in land use theoretically serve as mechanisms for increasing productivity through the infusion of capital, technology and labor in marginally developed or unutilized areas like the Gambella Plains. Ethiopia's agriculture suffers from lack of capital and technology. Hence, the commercialization of underutilized or marginally utilized land through the infusion of capital and technology seems a rational strategy from both regional and national developmental strategy perspectives (Peter Richards, 2015, p.1030).

The commercialization of agricultural development through the infusion of technology and capital in indigenous population areas of Ethiopia has been viewed rather ambiguously by different stakeholders. Both indigenous populations and civic organizations have provided a counter narrative in which the leasing of vast areas of indigenous population land to foreign and domestic commercial farm investors is viewed as a top-down political decision that has very little to do with the socioeconomic development and welfare of the local population. The displacement and relocation of indigenous populations is often cited as a clear manifestation of the deleterious impact of such a national and regional development strategy. In the case of Horizon's Gambella rice development project, the narratives woven by different stakeholders seem to be based on a complex set of trajectories including land rights, identity, livelihoods, displacement of indigenous populations, contradictory information on indigenous population expectations from the developer and a whole host of other socio-cultural issues.

The conflicting narratives about the socioeconomic, political and environmental impact of the rice development project are examined from various discursive perspectives including political ecology (Mesfin,1986); indigenous populations and their rights over land and resources (Suzanna Sawyer and Edmund Terrence Gomez, 2014), Subaltern representations (Victoria Lawson, 2007) and neoliberal public/private partnership and institutional capture by transnational corporations (Korinna Hortu, 2014).The excellent UNRISD (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development) book on "the Politics of Resource Extraction-Indigenous peoples, Multinational Corporations and the State" (Sawyer Suzanna and Edmund Gomez, 2014) and the Africa Progress Report by Africa Progress Panel (2013) entitled "Equity in Extractives: Stewarding Africa's Natural Resources for All" have treated the subject of the politics of resource extraction from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. Peter Richards (2015) has treated how Brazil's agriculture in frontier areas impacted land use change and displacement of indigenous populations.

The tensions that have developed in the Gambella region of Ethiopia should be analyzed from the perspective of the neoliberal logic of economic liberalization in which the state essentially plays the role of a broker in facilitating access to the lands and resources of indigenous communities. The relationship between the Ethiopian state, Midroc's Horizon Plantations, indigenous communities and civil society institutions is taking place in an environment of asymmetrical power relations. Research on transnational governmentality - "a concept meant to open up inquiry into the myriad of more or less calculated and systematic thoughts and actions that seek to shape, regulate, or manage the way people conduct themselves by acting upon their hopes, circumstances and environment" informs us about the unfolding of complex institutional relationships regulating access to and exploitation of natural resources in indigenous communities (Michel Foucault, 1991, cited in Sawyer and Gomez, 2014). The current Ethiopian state and non-state actors (multinational corporations, indigenous communities, civil society organizations and opposition political parties) have been engaged in the construction of different narratives about the benefits and challenges of modern development and the forms of regulation and governance that should define resource extraction in marginalized indigenous communities.

Studies on the resource extraction experiences of Chad and Cameroon (Korinna Horta, 2014) and Nigera (Ben Naanen, 2014) have shown unequivocally that indigenous populations have suffered multidimensional abuses from the confluence of the interests of state elites, multinational corporations and international financial institutions. Patricia Ortega Croetto (2014) has discussed the dynamics of the transformation of the modern state in many developing parts of the world into a 'broker' state that 'represented the interests of private capital while subordinating its role as a defender of legality, human rights and the environment' due to the 'blurring of the private and public spaces' (Naanen, 2014, p.123). Flint and Taylor (2011, p.151) have succinctly expressed the relationship between the state and multinational corporations under Neoliberalism as 'sort of a symbiotic relationship with each needing the other.

Every state requires capital accumulation within its territory to provide the material basis of its power. Every corporation requires the legal conditions for accumulation that the state provides' (Colin Flint and Peter Taylor, 2011).

Midroc Ethiopia PLC is the largest multinational corporation that is extensively engaged in agriculture, industry, mining, real estate, hotels and tourism, education, health care, sports and youth affairs, trade, energy and information. In addition to its political and economic engagement in the nation's development, its philanthropic activities in every sphere of national, regional and local development are quite significant. In fact, it can be safely argued that it is a state within a state with very close political, economic, cultural and environmental links to the political and economic and social development agendas and programs of the Ethiopian state.

Since the tensions in Gambella have revolved around the contested terrain of governance of land and resources and indigenous people's rights over their use and control, it is appropriate to shed some light on indigeneity and the right of indigenous populations to land, resources and governance of their territory.

A wide range of definitions and legal interpretations of indigenous peoples and their rights are reflected in the literature. Sawyer and Gomez (2014) see the meaning and category of indigenous people as ambiguous and find theoretical grounding in the definition of an indigenous person 'through self-ascription, and the possibility of membership determined by birth'. They hold the view that "indigenous identity is neither historically fixed nor universally apparent. Rather shifting regimes of recognition are what define one to be indigenous in lived practice" (Suzana Sawyer and Edmund Terrence Gomez, 2014, "On Indigenous Identity and a Language of Rights" p.9).

Rovillos RD and Taull-Corpuz have quoted the 1997 Philippine Indigenous Peoples Republic Act definition of indigenous peoples as:

"a group of people or homogeneous societies identified by self-ascription and ascription by others, who have continuously lived as organized community on communally bounded and defined territory, and who have, under claims of ownership since time immemorial, occupied, possessed and utilized such territories, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions and other distinctive cultural traits, or who have through resistance to political, social and cultural inroads of colonization, non-indigenous religious and cultures become historically differentiated from the majority of Filipinos" (Rovillos RD and Taull-Corpuz, 2014, p.138).

Flint and Taylor (2011, p.171) defined indigenous peoples' demands as a package of rights, including 'the right to preserve their cultural identity; a right to territory; responsibility over the fate of their people and their environment and the right to control their own land and people's national determination' (p.171)

The rights of indigenous peoples have been recognized by international legal documents and Declarations for a long time. Sawyer and Gomez (2014) in their article "On indigenous Identity and a Language of Rights" have pointed out that the earliest concern for the protection of the rights of indigenous populations and issues was made by the International Labor Organization, ILO as far back as 1957 when its convention 107 expressed the need for protecting the rights of indigenous peoples and integrating them into mainstream national society (pp.10-11). In 1989, the earlier concern was revised to reflect the need for protecting the rights of indigenous peoples. Sawyer and Gomez saw both ILO conventions as having "created instruments through which indigenous peoples might assert their claims to traditional lands including the provision for autonomy over areas associated with indigenous communities" (p11). In June, 2006, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) came out with a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples. The UN Declaration had gone farther than other documents in calling the world community to guarantee the rights of indigenous communities to 'freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development-in exercising their rights to self-determination, autonomy in matters relating to their internal and external affairs' (UN, 2006, p.1).

Both the ILO convention 169 and the UN Declarations have not been ratified by all countries of the world. In fact, the ILO convention was ratified by only 22 countries out of the 192 UN member states. In Africa, only the Central African Republic had ratified it. The UN Declaration was a non-binding instrument and was ratified by 144 countries in favor, 4 against and 11 abstentions (p.31). The non-binding nature of these instruments and the lukewarm reception of the Convention and Declarations reflect the half-hearted nature of the global commitment. In the Africa region, the African Commission of Human and Peoples Rights has been a rather ineffective organ in monitoring the respect that national governments show to their indigenous populations (Sawyer and Gomez, 2014).

In Ethiopia, the country's development policy has been based on the neoliberal agenda of encouraging market forces to play a key role in economic growth and social transformation. The concept of the 'developmentalist state' reverberates in official narratives such that the state plays a key role in transforming the political, economic and socio-cultural lives of the population. The 9 ethnically defined 'kilils' (regions) were created on the notions of democratizing governance and ensuring the equal participation of nations and nationalities. Articles 39, 51 and 52 of the Constitution guarantee nations and nationalities unfettered rights to promote their own development and decide their own future as members of the Ethiopian Federation (Ethiopian Constitution, 1991)

The issue of resource extraction in indigenous communities can be analyzed from both political economy and political ecology perspectives. From a political economy perspective, the role of the state in facilitating both domestic and foreign actors to open- up and exploit the vast plains of Gambella without the consensual understanding and decision of indigenous communities is the product of asymmetrical power relations between global, state, regional and indigenous communities. Korinna Hortu (2014, pp. 204-229) has dealt with the inequities of power in African countries where the collision of the state and powerful multinational resource extraction firms resulted in corruption and plunder pushing indigenous populations to the abyss while others prosper. She argues that public/private partnership often results in institutional capture of the state by powerful transnational resource extraction corporations which allows power holding elites to engage in predatory plunder and corruption. The fact that Midroc PLC Ethiopia is the most powerful transnational corporation with significant tentacles in the political and economic domains of Ethiopia's development reverberates into the discussion of whether such institutional capture was involved in acquiring access to the Gambella rice development project with significant sunken investment outlays.

From a political ecology perspective, it is necessary to see resource extraction from a historical analysis of nature/society relationships in which the confluence between indigenous peoples rights and the neoliberal agenda of extracting resources through public-private partnerships leads to socio-spatial patterns of resource access, capture and control that advantages the powerful and disadvantages the weak and disorganized indigenous population groups. The loss of security, political unrest and socioeconomic marginalization of indigenous communities are concomitant results of such a regime of resource extraction (Foucault, 1980. 'Truth to Power' in Colin Gordon (ed) *power/knowledge*, New York, Pantheon). Mesfin Wolde Mariam's extensive study of rural vulnerability to famine in Ethiopia has clearly articulated the view that the asymmetrical power relations between the rulers that hold power the political, economic and social institutions of the state and the voiceless millions of rural populations is responsible for the misery and famine visiting the later routinely (Mesfin Wolde Mariam, 1986)

Alternative Narratives of Gambella's Horizon Rice Development Project

The Horizon rice plantation project in Gambella has been the subject of discordant narratives among key stakeholders, namely: the state, the investor, indigenous populations and civil society organizations. Sawyer and Gomez (2014) have presented the global nexus of capitalism and transnational governmentality in resource extraction in indigenous communities as follows.

“The restructuring of capitalism that the world has witnessed over the past three decades has given rise to the confluence of ever-spectacular forces. The near global embrace of policies that simultaneously deregulate national economies and liberalize trade and investment has facilitated the capacity of MNCs to assertively expand their operations around the world, strategically inserting and retracting capital. Multinational financial institutions and MNCs have both compelled into existence and guided neoliberal regimes worldwide. Concomitantly, ever-growing transnational alliances and networks among an array of civil society associations, advocacy groups and watchdog organizations have emerged to monitor the operations of MNCs and multilateral banks, and the effects of their operations on local populations, especially indigenous peoples. As states have increasingly relinquished their former responsibilities to their citizen, increasingly MNCs, NGOs have assumed dimensions of government- in the struggle to shape the forms of regulation and governance that define resource extraction around the globe. A universal language of indigenous is intertwined with this in complex ways” (Sawyer and Gomez, 2014, “Transnational Governmentality in the Context of Resource Extraction”, p.8.)

Empirical studies and the contributions of indigenous rights advocates, indigenous populations themselves and scholars in the field have found that the greater protection and empowerment of indigenous populations in various parts of the world could be ensured through such measures as the granting of land rights, the recognition of their cultures, customary authorities, social organizations and resource management systems (ibid, p.2)

Against this broad brush of the context of resource extraction in indigenous communities, it would be useful to examine the differential narratives of the key stakeholders in the Gambella Horizon rice development project. It is appropriate to point out that the development contestations in the region are dynamic. Likewise, the views of important stakeholders regarding the rice project would change with time reflecting realities on the ground.

Government Narrative

Government narrative of the project has been cast in the language of a win-win strategy in which the lives of the indigenous populations are improved, agricultural production is increased, food security is ensured, employment opportunities are expanded, foreign exchange earnings are increased, infrastructures and services are delivered to the population and transfer of technology and knowhow is facilitated. The rational and effective use of hitherto unutilized and underutilized natural resources and the integration of the indigenous population into the mainstream of national political, economic and social life were also viewed as important objectives of the project. Government narratives have seen the agricultural investment as one that brings knowhow, technology, jobs, transformation of bush land into productive farm, promotion of food security and export revenues (Davison, William, Jan 1, 2015. The Guardian, Ministry of Agriculture, 2015)

Horizon rice plantations project in Gambella is viewed as a component of the broader agricultural development strategy of the country. The call for a coordinated effort between federal, regional and local administrations to upgrade infrastructure, ensure the supply of labor and review policies and strategies to attract private investment in commercial farming are the cornerstones of the new agricultural growth program. The establishment of the Agricultural Investment and Land Administration Agency in 2013 is demonstrative of its commitment to the promotion of foreign investment in large scale commercial farms (Ministry of Agriculture 2015. Agricultural Growth Program. <http://Ethioagp.org/769/>)

Investor Narrative

I had an excellent opportunity to pose a series of questions to the chief executive officer of Horizon Plantations, Mr. Jemal Ahmed, regarding various aspects of the Gambella rice development project including its original conceptualization, the role of the state in facilitating Midroc's operation, the major challenges and opportunities faced in project implementation, the corporations' social responsibility, relations with the indigenous population, its strategy of creating a 'hybrid economy', questions of institutional capture, civil society allegations of human rights violations, 'forced' villagization of indigenous populations to facilitate Horizon's plantation, regional and local governance, security and environmental conditions, Horizon's engagement in infrastructural development, employment opportunities for the indigenous populations, training and human capital formation of indigenous populations. The interview was conducted on June 22/2015 at his office in Addis Abeba. He indicated that Midroc was approached by the Federal government to develop the vast Gambella plains to enable the local population benefit from the modern development project. He noted that the decision to develop the Gambella plains was initially based on a desire to establish a palm plantation. This idea was dropped when it was realized that such a plantation would require a massive migration of highlander population and create a major socioeconomic and cultural impact on the indigenous population. The lack of a feasibility study posed a serious challenge at making a final decision. Mohammed Al Amoudi, the owner of Microc PLC took a personal interest in the project and authorized its implementation in 2010.

The project site was originally developed in the 1980s when the Alwero earth dam was constructed by the state to facilitate the development of a 10,000 hectares cotton farm. Hence, there was a good deal of sunken investment on the project site including the nearby Abobo agricultural research station. Horizon plantations undertook a massive investment in infrastructures, equipment and machinery, built a large storage facility at Gambella and a rice processing plant at Debre Zeit (Bishoftu) to develop the 7,500 ha farm that is ready to start production in 2016. The study of the area had indicated that there was adequate rainfall for rain-fed rice production. Nonetheless, Horizon plantation built a 31.4 km primary canal and two secondary canals to irrigate 6,000 hectares. The remaining 1,500 ha will be devoted to rain-fed production. He indicated that the US 220 million dollars already spent on the project makes it extremely difficult to recoup the investment in the short term. He justified the huge investment based on the long-term objective of developing an additional 290,000 ha of land in the region. The chief executive officer noted that the research office of the plantation had already developed three excellent varieties of aromatic rice that would have high demand in Saudi Arabia, which is not only a major investor but also the future market for the exported segment of the production.

Regarding the role of the state in the project, the chief executive officer applauded the strong support that both federal and regional governments have been giving to the project right from the beginning. He cited acquisition of land, ensuring security, providing the necessary infrastructures and services and excellent cooperation of local government institutions as the most significant support systems facilitated by the state.

On the question of Horizon's impact on the displacement of indigenous population, the CEO noted that no people were displaced by the Gambella rice development project site. He strongly refuted the accusation of opposition narratives that the rice project was instrumental in the massive displacement and abuse of indigenous populations. Contrary to the wrongful allegations, the investor has been engaging the indigenous populations and their representatives both formally and informally through structured discussions and concrete material and logistical support for the region's development. He cited the August, 2015 transfer of 30 million dollars-worth of tractors and other machinery that Horizon plantations handed over to the local population for the region's agricultural development program as an excellent example of the projects strong support for the overall transformation of the region. The employment of the local population as operators of tractors, drivers, security personnel and other fields has benefitted the local population immensely. He lauded the strength, patience and perseverance of the local population at the work place.

On the question of Horizon's alleged institutional capture of federal, regional and local institutions and officers to do its bidding, the officer strongly objected to such a narrative and alluded that it was a desperate attempt by Diaspora opposition groups to dirty the image of the investor and the state. The excellent relationship between the state and the investor is based on a shared vision of promoting overall socio-economic development of the region and improving the lives of the indigenous populations and others who are engaged in various aspects of the development project.

Regarding the possibility of creating a 'hybrid economy' in which the investor, the government and the indigenous populations benefit from the investment, he noted that the vision is based on such a mission. Since the project is expecting its first major production result in 2016, it is too early to anticipate such a possibility in the short term. Yet, he underlined the fact that the employment opportunities and infrastructures already put in place are promoting the vision materially in significant ways.

One of the questions that I raised in the interview was about the security condition at the project site. The CEO noted that local security condition has improved significantly since the killing of two Pakistani and two local employees by opposition groups. He cited the diligent work of the local security personnel in tracing and bringing to justice the perpetrators of the killings. He indicated that a few of the important tasks of governance need to be improved by the federal, state and local governments to ensure security on a sustainable basis.

On the question of the availability of the required labor force for the farms' various operations, he noted that many of the workers on the site were largely highlander populations. The hard and arduous nature of farm work under extremely high temperature weather conditions has not been part of the culture of indigenous populations. Hence problems of absenteeism, drunkenness and negligence of duty have been recurring in daily farm operations. The lack of trained indigenous populations in critical farm operations has necessitated the migration of rather large numbers of highlander populations sometimes causing frictions and conflicts.

On the issue of the much maligned villagization program, the CEO reiterated the view that the rice development project had not displaced any people from its site. This was corroborated by a satellite imagery of the rice development between 2007 and 2011 that indicated the fact that the land rested on previously undeveloped land (AAAS, 2015). He noted that the failure of the villagization program was largely due to the incompetence and corruption of local and regional officials. He believed that local officials had been implicated in the diversion of resources that were meant for the villagization program for personal uses. He cited the example of one of the regional government officials who fled to the Sudan when Federal government officials noticed the pitiful condition in some of the new resettlement areas and demanded an explanation. Fearful of recrimination, the officer fled to the Sudan and accused the government of diverting World Bank money for the resettlement program. He underscored the fact the Federal government had given significant policy, program and financial support for the successful implementation of the villagization program.

On the question of opposition groups and civil society organizations narrative of the rice development project as infringing on indigenous population rights, the CEO, considered the accusations as politically motivated and not based on any objective assessment of ground realities. He admired the democratization and the leading developmental role of the state in the face of many other competing responsibilities. He saw the opposition narrative as ideologically bankrupt.

The CEO enumerated the following critical challenges that needed to be addressed by the government and concerned stakeholders to realize the development objectives of the region.

- Lack of adequate government focus on the region
- Poor governance, insubordination, corruption of local elites
- Lack of trained indigenous populations to assume farm operation responsibilities
- Build an environment in which the rule of law is ensured and respected
- Promote education and human capital formation targeting the indigenous populations and those working in the region
- Resolve inter-ethnic conflicts between the Anyuaa and Nuers and between the indigenous and highlander populations
- Improve infrastructures and services in the region
- Improve the cultural life of the indigenous population by fighting against such rampant problems as polygamy, STD/HIV/AIDS
- Improve the environmental health condition of the population by addressing such critical challenges as malaria and poor access to potable water and sanitation
- Involve other investors in the region's development
- Address the socio-economic, political, cultural and environmental questions of the indigenous population through dialogue, education and engagement rather than force, intimidation and abuse

Indigenous Population, Civil Society IFI (international finance institutions) Narrative

Civil society organizations and international finance institutions from outside the country such as the Oakland Institute, Human Rights Watch, the World Bank and British Development Department Office have expressed their views about the socioeconomic, political and environmental impacts of the Gambella rice project and other related investments. The International Financial Institutions (IFI) have largely acknowledged allegations that they had been complicit in human rights violations committed by the government and the investors by supporting specific development programs and government initiatives (Oakland Institute, 2013). The plight of Gambellans is often represented as one of identity, livelihood and strong historical ties to land, language, distinct customary practices and indigenous institutions and resources. Their cultural survival depends on their inalienable right to land and resources as defined by the UN Declaration on Indigenous peoples and as historically practiced over centuries. The most frequently-cited narratives of the indigenous populations revolve around the following issues.

- The government has acted as a willing and active player in availing land to investors in the Gambella region without any meaningful participation and consent of the indigenous populations
- The forced displacement of thousands of indigenous populations from their ancestral lands and livelihoods was contrary to international law on the rights of indigenous peoples and the constitution of the Federal government of Ethiopia (Sasha Shavkin, 2015; David Smith, 2015; Oakland Institute, 2013)
- The lack of democracy and weak social organization, political structure and resource management skills of the indigenous population has given the government and investor to impose their wills without any meaningful engagement and consent of the indigenous population
- Poor governance at the regional and local levels has encouraged corruption, inter-ethnic conflict, human rights violations and insubordination among government and party officials (David Smith, April 20015)
- Historical prejudice of the central government and mainstream Ethiopian culture sees the indigenous people as backward and in need of civilization; hence the forceful imposition of the rice development project and other projects on the indigenous peoples abrogating their rights and livelihoods (Dereje, Feyissa 2010)
- Notwithstanding the provisions of articles 51 and 52 of the Ethiopian constitution, the Federal government does not have a functioning separate legal recognition and guarantees for the traditional and customary rights of indigenous populations (Ethiopian Constitution, 1991)
- Government strategy of integration of the indigenous populations into the dominant mainstream highland culture is a violation of UN Declaration on the preservation of the rights and cultures of indigenous populations
- Lack of accountability and transparency in resource management among local elites and managers has led to massive financial mismanagement and the poor delivery of infrastructures and services in the new villages that were established to resettle the displaced indigenous populations
- Violence perpetrated against the indigenous populations has resulted in the deaths, disappearances, torture, rape of indigenous populations of Gambella. The relocation of 37,883 families in the region as part of the villagization program of the government was cited as one of the major human rights abuses inflicted on the indigenous population (Sava Shavkin, 2015, Annyaa news, 2013)
- The weakness or lack of commitment on the part of the government to deal with the health and welfare of the newly resettled populations has resulted in extreme poverty and deprivation of the settlers (Lewison, Martin W. March 24, 2010)
- World Bank's protection of basic services program and British development aid to basic service delivery have contributed to the implementation of the forced removal of indigenous populations and the delivery of their ancestral lands and rights to the investors (Sasha Chavkin, 2015; Sam Jones and Mark Anderson, Feb 27, 2015))
- The project is a secret deal between the government and investors and the indigenous populations had little or no public information about the physical, socioeconomic, cultural and environmental consequences of the rice project (Lewison, Martin W. March 24, 2010).
- The selected sites for the resettlement of displaced indigenous populations were less fertile, further away from clean water sources, fishing grounds and local resources needed for the livelihoods of the peoples (Human Rights Watch, 2012)

- Local elites holding formal and informal political offices and power are fully engaged in massive corruption, abuse of power, nepotism and plunder; hence they do not represent the wishes and desires of the indigenous populations. They are collaborators with the state and investor and operate on the principle of personal motives of access to political power, financial incentives and promoting a patronage system that rewards and benefits them mostly
- The plantation will have serious consequences on the wildlife and biodiversity of the region hence affecting not only the livelihoods of the indigenous populations but also on the biological integrity of the environment of the region
- Poor governance at the regional and local levels has encouraged corruption, inter-ethnic conflict and insubordination among government and party officials
- International finance institutions such as the World Bank and Britain's DFD have not found any connection between their basic services support financing with resettlement and human rights abuses (Jones and Anderson, Feb 27/2015; and Sasha Shaskin, April 2015)

Conclusions and Recommendations

The conflicting narratives discussed in this paper reflect the complexity of resource extraction projects in indigenous peoples' lands in Gambella, western Ethiopia. Historical political economy structures have left these areas in relative underdevelopment, neglect and poverty. The recent attempt to utilize the land and natural resources of the Gambella region of Western Ethiopia has drawn the opposition of the indigenous populations, civil society organizations, Human rights advocates and other supporters internally and externally. The inextricable link that indigenous societies' culture and identity have with their land and natural resources requires a careful strategy of stakeholder planning and engagement from the conceptualization to the planning and development stages of resource extraction. The basic objective of Horizon rice plantation project is to develop a vast unutilized and largely unpopulated part of the region for rice production. This mission should be done in a manner that promotes the development of the affected populations' human rights, dignity, livelihoods and cultural values. The informed participation of the indigenous people of Gambella should have been the cornerstone of the opening-up of the vast plain for investors. One can surmise that the strong-arm strategy employed by the government to avail land to investors has created the counter narratives of the indigenous communities, civil society organizations and advocacy groups.

The positive ramifications of the 10,000 hectares rice development project are many and varied. The economic, social and cultural transformation of a population group that has been marginalized by successive central and regional governments is a welcome development that the indigenous populations would support if given the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process democratically. Both government and investor narratives are couched in positive developmental objectives and goals of societal transformation, improvement of living standards, employment generation, export earnings, improvement of local tax bases, infrastructures and services. Unfortunately, the indigenous populations' knowledge and participation in the conceptualization and planning of the investment project was woefully inadequate or nonexistent. The resettlement of over 40,000 families was done without adequate preparations and logistical support system. The political fallout from the use of force to remove the people and resettle them in geographical environments that were less sustainable than earlier settlements seems to be significant.

Given this reality, the question of how to amend earlier mistakes and positively transform the lives of the affected people is of paramount significance in national, regional and local development. The analysis of the different narratives of the stakeholders indicates that there is urgent need for evolving and implementing the following critical strategies and actions to:

- Improve governance at the regional and state level so that the indigenous populations' legitimate rights to land, resources and opportunities are democratically realized;
- Institute a special system of government/private oversight that regulates and guarantees indigenous populations in the region from being the subject of deliberate mistreatment, discrimination, dispossession, exploitation and marginalization;
- Ensure respect for human and civil rights of the indigenous populations and put in place a working legal machinery that punishes abusers and transgressors'

- Create a secure political and environmental condition for the smooth operation of the development project by engaging the indigenous populations in various spheres of the projects' operation
- Educate and train the indigenous population so that human capital formation will contribute towards the opening-up of employment and livelihood opportunities
- Conduct public administration in a transparent and accountable manner such that local and regional institutional structures perform their duties more effectively
- Fight corruption, nepotism and abuse of power in the defense forces, government institutions and local elites manning the machinery of government
- Engage horizon plantations in community development programs such that the indigenous population will have a sense of community and belonging to the project
- Ensure the rule of law and institute a system of incentives that reward excellence in individuals, groups and communities
- Advance a culture of tolerance of diversity, coexistence and integration of other peoples and avoid divisive political and socio-cultural practices. The recurrent feuds between the Nuer and Annuaks and the highlander-indigenous populations stem from both cultural and discriminatory administrative and cultural practices.
- Create democratic platforms where the problems, needs, desires and aspirations of the indigenous populations are aired in a democratic manner
- Engage the population as out-growers so that Horizon plantations will be organically linked to the economic and social welfare of the population
- Protect the environment through a planned program of afforestation, soil and water conservation, wildlife habitat protection and management
- Give special focus on the region's overall development so that the institutional capacity of the indigenous populations is built on strong human capital and financial resources
- Protect the positive cultural practices and values of the indigenous populations and discourage negative and backward practices that threaten the dignity and all-round development of the population
- Create a strong public/private partnership forum that brings all stakeholders together to discuss major issues of regional and project development
- The investor, Horizon plantations should have a proactive engagement in the community so that the indigenous populations and others working in the project have a sense of ownership

The United Nations Committee on the elimination of racial discrimination (UNCERD) has succinctly captured the responsibility of governments towards indigenous populations in the following appropriate manner.

“provide indigenous peoples with conditions allowing for a sustainable economic and social development compatible with cultural characteristics...ensure that members of indigenous peoples have equal rights in respect of effective participation in public life and that no decisions directly relating to their rights and interests are taken without their informed consent;...[and] recognize and protect the rights of the indigenous peoples to own, develop, control and use their communal lands, territories and resources and, where they have been deprived of their lands and territories traditionally owned or otherwise inhabited or used without their free and informed consent, to take steps to return those lands and territories” (General Recommendation XXIII: Indigenous Peoples, 1997; cited in Sawyer and Gomez, 2014, “On Indigenous Identity and a language of Rights”, p.12)

The shared responsibilities of governments, investors, indigenous societies and citizens in promoting equity in the extraction of resources was also well-captured by the following position of the Africa progress report of 2013.

“African governments should start with a strengthened focus on fiscal policy and equitable spending on infrastructures, health, education, water and sanitation. Moves towards greater transparency accountability should be broadened and deepened....international actions create an enabling environment for strengthened governance in Africa. African citizens should demand that their governments meet the highest standards of propriety and disclosure.....foreign investors can play a critical role in facilitating change by partnering with governments to strengthen transparency by supporting skills development and by carefully assessing the social and environmental impacts of their operations” (Africa Progress Report. 2013, pp.9-10)

I believe that these guidelines on respect for human rights and the judicious expedition of shared responsibilities of different stakeholders in Gambella’s Horizon rice development project could bring about a hybrid economy in which indigenous populations, the investor, the government and local businesses will all be beneficiaries. Converting Gambella’s land and other resources into increased well-being should be the ultimate objective of all. The rights of indigenous populations to sustainable livelihoods, socio-economic development and the preservation of their cultural heritage and natural resources should not be compromised by myopic regional developmental objectives and sectoral interests.

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