

“HOW THEY TRICKED US”

LIVING WITH THE GIBE III DAM AND SUGARCANE PLANTATIONS IN SOUTHWEST ETHIOPIA



The Oakland Institute

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The author of this report is not mentioned by name to ensure access to local communities is not undermined.

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Cover Photo: Kara parent and child sitting along the bank of the Omo River. There is a factory off to the right side of the photo, November 2017 © Kelly Fogel

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The Oakland Institute, 2019

Executive Summary

Ethiopia's Lower Omo Valley is home to numerous Indigenous groups, predominantly pastoralists, hunter gatherers, and flood-retreat cultivators. Their livelihoods, culture, and identity are intimately linked with the plains and snaking Omo River, relying significantly on the river's annual flood for the cultivation of crops and grazing of cattle.

But for the past 13 years, these groups have come under threat as the Ethiopian government has pushed forward with its plans to "transform" the region. In 2006, the then-government embarked on the construction of the Gibe III Dam to increase Ethiopia's energy potential and enable the development of large-scale irrigated plantations downstream. By 2011, they had embarked upon the Kuraz Sugar Development Project (KSDP) – a massive sugarcane plantation project with five

associated factories that was originally designated 245,000 ha, located downstream from the dam.¹

For over a decade, the Oakland Institute has raised alarm about the conditions and threats that both the Gibe III Dam and KSDP pose for Indigenous communities in the region.² Now, several years on, new research conducted among local communities reveals the true impact on those who have called the area home for centuries, in particular the Bodi, Mursi, and Northern Kwegu. The findings call for urgent action by the new government that has been led by Dr. Abiy Ahmed since April 2018.

The end of the Omo River's annual flood has decimated local livelihoods. Promises by both the government and dam



Power line going from Gibe III Dam to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia © The Oakland Institute



builder Salini of an artificial flood³ have never materialized.⁴ Communities face hunger, displacement, lack of livelihoods, and threats to their culture and identities.

Resettlement sites offered to communities have likewise been riddled with failed promises and abuse. Plots are often not big enough to feed families,⁵ ripened crops have been ploughed over,⁶ communities have been forced to dig their own irrigation canals under perilous conditions,⁷ and key services that were promised – schooling, health care, grinding mills, food aid, and electricity – have either failed to materialize or been woefully inadequate.⁸ Despite these failures, the government has pressured communities to abandon pastoralism and adopt sedentary lifestyles.⁹

Key to the KSDP was the promise of hundreds of thousands of new jobs in the region. In reality, not only have a small percentage of these jobs materialized,¹⁰ but the large majority are given to migrant workers from other regions of Ethiopia.¹¹ This is rapidly changing the demographics in the region, making Indigenous Peoples minorities in their own lands, while also bringing disease and spurring local conflict.¹² The jobs offered to the Bodi, Mursi, and Northern Kwegu – hunting buffalo that eat sugarcane for the men and removing crushed sugarcane refuse for the women – are mostly seasonal, temporary, and low paid.¹³

Introduction

Ethiopia, with its mountainous geography, is considered the “water tower” of Africa. For years, the transformation of its rivers for both hydroelectric dams and irrigation for large-scale plantations has been a cornerstone of the country’s economic development plans.¹⁸ These dams have significantly increased local power production and allowed the government to pen numerous energy export agreements with neighboring countries,¹⁹ while also expanding the country’s sugarcane plantations and factories.²⁰ The export potential of both energy and sugar has been a major factor in the US\$14 billion investments that Ethiopia has made in dam building.²¹

But these massive development projects are wreaking havoc on the lives of local people. Of particular concern is the Gibe III Dam, which is generating significant hydropower for the country and providing irrigation to the Lower Omo Valley,

In the face of these massive changes, hunger is widespread¹⁴ and food aid that was initially used to draw local communities to resettlement sites is now being used as a condition of staying in these sites.¹⁵ Local violence – including a rash of vehicle incidents near plantations that local communities believe to be intentional – is also on the rise.¹⁶

While the previous government insisted that development in the Lower Omo was imperative to the country’s development goals, its pursuit of the Gibe III Dam and KSDP has come at the cost of locally-driven development plans, including the Mursi-Bodi Community Conservation Area, which local communities have advocated for, for eleven years.¹⁷

But change might now be possible. In April 2018, a new Prime Minister took office in Ethiopia with a reform agenda that emphasizes human rights and *medemer* – an Amharic word for coming together and synergy – across the country. In this context, attention must be turned to the Lower Omo to address past abuses and usher in a new era of development – one that benefits and includes Indigenous communities, their traditions, cultures, and livelihoods. After years of disinformation, broken promises, and widespread abuse, this is the only way forward.

allowing for the creation of the Kuraz Sugar Development Project (KSDP).

For over a decade, the Oakland Institute has raised alarm about the conditions and threats that both the Gibe III Dam and KSDP pose for Indigenous communities in the region.²² This new report, based on on-the-ground research conducted between September 2017 and May 2018 and follow-up interviews, reveals the true impact of both schemes, with a specific focus on three local Indigenous groups: the Mursi, Bodi, and Northern Kwegu.²³ It does so in four parts: first, an overview of the people of the Omo Valley; then, the history of the Gibe III Dam and Kuraz Sugar Development Project; next, an examination of the effects of these projects on the lives, livelihoods, culture, and well-being of the Bodi, Mursi, and Northern Kwegu; and finally, the fallout from the project. The report ends with suggestions for possible ways forward.





Omo River in 2012, before the completion of the Gibe III Dam © The Oakland Institute



The Peoples of the Lower Omo Valley

The Lower Omo Valley is home to over a dozen Indigenous groups, eight of whom rely heavily on the river for their livelihoods.

The delta where the Omo River pours into Lake Turkana is the home of the Dassanech, the largest of the Indigenous groups in the region with a population of approximately 48,000.²⁴ For centuries, the rhythm of the Omo floods have been vital to Dassanech and their forbearers livelihoods. As the flood waters retreat, the delta becomes a vast fertile area to grow corn and sorghum and to graze cattle on newly sprouting grass.²⁵

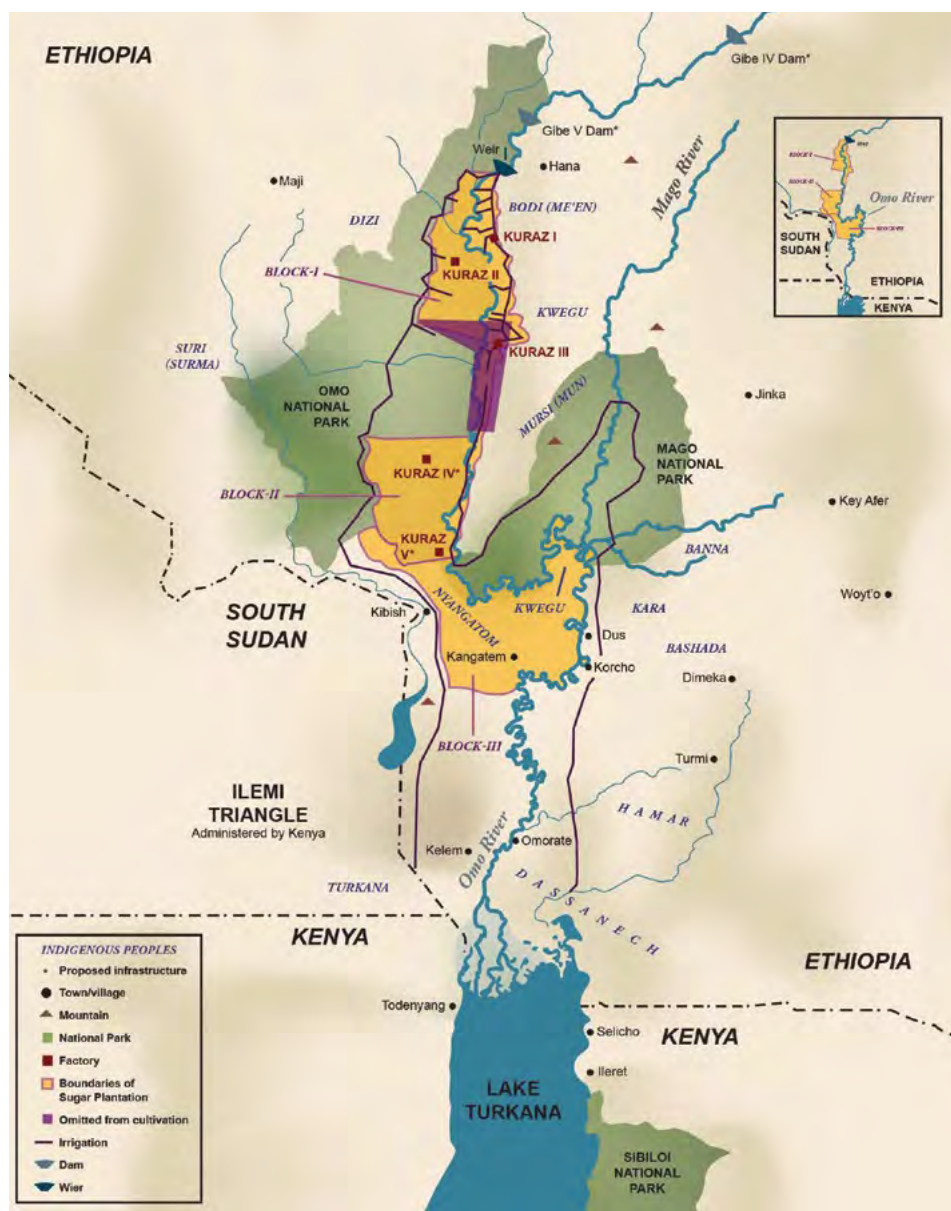
To the north is the land of the 25,000-strong Nyangatom. The Omo River provides a welcome oasis to the dry plains where they graze their cattle, goats, and sheep. Like most in the region, the Nyangatom practice flood-retreat cultivation, but there is a special feature in the section of the Lower Omo where the Nyangatom live. When the Omo floods, it fills many natural ponds along its snaking path. As these ponds dry out, the Nyangatom and others use these to plant crops.²⁶

The Murle, totaling 1,500 people, live amongst the Nyangatom. They were once a much larger group, but attacks by Ethiopian highlanders at the turn of the 19th century and accompanying disease greatly reduced their numbers and destroyed their autonomy. They crossed the Omo and joined the Nyangatom where they now practice agro-pastoralism.²⁷

The Kara, a group of 1,500 people, have retained their autonomy by forming alliances with the groups around them. They herd, practice flood-retreat cultivation, and fish on the Omo.

The Mugudji – hunters, gatherers, and agriculturalists – live along the Omo River. They are the southern section of Kwegu. In recent years they have become herders.

The Bodi, who call themselves *Me'en*, number around 5,500. They are cattle herders with smaller herds of goats and sheep. The Bodi have traditionally cultivated along the Omo River after the seasonal floods, while also practicing rain-fed cultivation in the bush. Their semi-nomadic lifestyle brought them back and forth from the Omo to the plains. Men and boys often travel to find grass for the herds while living in makeshift villages. Their culture



Overview map of the Omo-Turkana Basin showing the planned extent of the KSDP¹⁰



Two Kara women standing by the Omo River, April 2018 © Kelly Fogel

– and indeed their identity – centers around cattle, from exchanging cattle in marriages to the presence of cattle in all their rituals.

The Bodi's neighbors to the south are the Mursi, who call themselves the *Mun* and number around 7,000. The Mursi have very similar livelihoods – they too are cattle herders and practice both flood-retreat cultivation on the Omo and rain-fed cultivation in the plains. Long isolated from the Ethiopian state, they retain their traditional systems of initiation, known as *nitha*,²⁸ and reverence for elders.

The Northern Kwegu, who are distinct from the geographically-separate group of Kwegu to the south, are a 2,000-strong band of Omo-flood cultivators, hunters and

gatherers, and goat herders. Their territory is adjacent to both banks of the Omo River and, prior to the dam, lived at the Omo year-round. Their territory intermixes with the Mursi and Bodi. The Kwegu fish, eat wild game and a large variety of wild plants, and collect wild honey. They generally don't own cattle. The Kwegu are acknowledged by all groups to be the people that occupied this land since time immemorial.

While all of these Indigenous groups have suffered the effects of the Gibe III Dam and KSDP, this report focuses on the Bodi, Mursi, and Northern Kwegu – the three groups hit the hardest by these developments thus far.²⁹ Their story paints a bleak picture for all Indigenous groups that call the Lower Omo Valley home, should these projects continue.



History of the Gibe III Dam and Plantations

Plans for the Gibe III Dam date back to the 1996 African Development Bank-commissioned Omo-Gibe Masterplan. The plan recommended that a dam be built on the Omo River in conjunction with irrigated plantations downstream, made possible by the dam's regulation of the Omo River's flow.³⁰ Construction began in July 2006.³¹ With the completion of the dam wall and the filling of the reservoir in February 2015,³² the annual flood of the Omo River, a key part of the Indigenous economies for thousands of years, came to an end.

The dam provided a double win for the Ethiopian government. The government would not only benefit from energy production and exports, but also from downstream plantations, made possible by regulating the flow of the Omo River so that irrigation infrastructure would not be damaged during the floods. Plans for the plantations were announced during a 2011 speech by then-Prime Minister Meles Zenawi at the 13th Annual Pastoralist Day celebration in Jinka:

“In the coming five years there will be a very big irrigation project and related agricultural development in this zone. I promise you that, even though this area is known as backward in terms of civilization, it will become an example of rapid development.”³³

The construction of the Kuraz Sugar Development Project – which was initially allocated 245,000 ha³⁴ – began shortly

after this announcement. The military-run Metals and Engineering Corporation (MetEC) was contracted to build the first sugar factory, Omo Kuraz I,³⁵ with plantations also installed with help from the military.

Since the early days of the project, widespread human rights abuses have been reported, including forced evictions, the plowing of ripening crops, beatings, and rape.³⁶ Factories have been erected in Bodi and Northern Mursiland, with resettlement reported among the Dassanech, Bodi, Mursi, Kwegu, and Suri in the surrounding mountains. People in the Nyangatom territory are expected to be resettled soon.³⁷

Despite the known and widespread impacts of both the dam and sugar plantations on people and the environment, no environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) was done before construction of the Gibe III Dam began. While an ESIA was eventually conducted for the KSDP, it took place after the project had begun and has not been released to the public.³⁸

Major donors including the World Bank, African Development Bank, and European Investment Bank all initially refused to fund the dam as it violated their social and environmental safeguard policies.³⁹ The World Bank, however, eventually indirectly financed the project by providing US\$684 million⁴⁰ for the construction of the power lines that will eventually distribute power from the Gibe III Dam to Kenya.⁴¹ Additional financiers for the



The Omo River, 2016

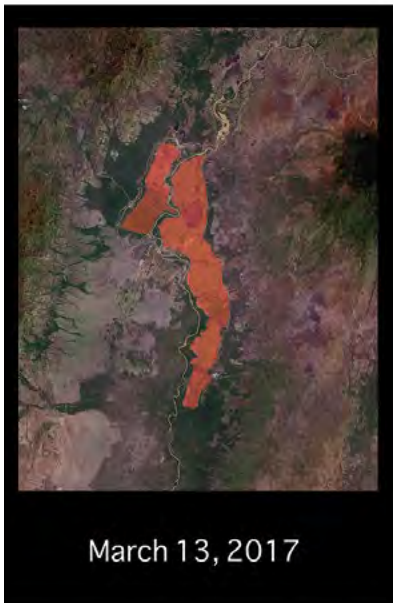


plantations and dam have included a variety of Chinese and Ethiopian banks such as the China Exim Bank, China Development Bank, and Industrial and Commercial Bank of China. Chinese firms are also involved in planning the factories and plantations, while the majority of the funding for the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation (ESC) is coming from

the state-run Commercial Bank of Ethiopia.⁴²

In October 2015, nine years after construction began, the Gibe III Dam started generating power.⁴³ Over the course of this research, around forty Mursi were asked about the annual flood: all confirmed that it has not been seen since then.⁴⁴

THE EXPANSION OF SUGAR PLANTATIONS IN LOWER OMO



The expansion of sugar plantations, Lower Omo, Ethiopia © Massimo Lambert-Mullen / Oakland Institute



The Dam and Disinformation

For years, the Ethiopian government has touted the Gibe III Dam and KSDP as projects that will benefit local populations through jobs, irrigation, access to services, and more. This is despite widespread opposition from local communities, anthropologists, and Indigenous rights and environmental organizations,⁴⁵ backed by 50 years of case studies showing the devastating impacts of dams on local communities.⁴⁶ Instead of heeding calls for a strategic plan for safeguarding livelihoods and compensating local people, the Ethiopian government and the dam builder Salini⁴⁷ waged a grand-scale disinformation campaign,⁴⁸ beginning with Meles Zenawi seizing on the event of an unusually large flood in 2006, where some people and cattle were washed away:

“[I am reminded of] the first time I saw this beautiful place. There was a big flood disaster. It took so many lives and did so much damage. When I was there I saw our huge fertile land covered by the flood. People and their cattle, who survived this catastrophe, were clinging to small islands made by the flood, waiting for the government to rescue them. ... The Gilgel Gibe 3 dam is developing rapidly and when it is finished the flood, which has been a huge problem for years in this region, will end forever.”⁴⁹

But the numbers killed and the extent of the disaster may have been overstated by the government.⁵⁰ In addition, the flood was a boon for local people resulting in an unusually abundant harvest. A Mursi man named Bibala remarked in 2009:

“That time [2006] the land was full of grain. We had a lot of flood water in the Omo River and we were very happy. Now the water is gone and we are all hungry. Later it will be death. In the time after the big flood the Omo had many, many people there [cultivating].”⁵¹

A major ruse pushed by the government was the promise of a controlled flood. In response to concerns raised about the loss of the Omo River’s annual floods and the hardship this would cause for the people downstream, the Ethiopian government and Salini incorporated a flood gate into the design of the dam. The gate would purportedly be open ten days a year creating an artificial flood that would compensate for the loss of the natural flood.⁵² But Salini later revealed that the controlled flood would only be temporary, “a transitory period of a suitable duration ... to switch from flood-retreat agriculture to more modern forms of agriculture.”⁵³ A review of the Gibe III project by a French consultancy firm in 2010 further noted that it was unlikely that the controlled flood would ever be released, as the lost revenue from ceasing electricity production during that time was US\$7.8 – 10.8 million.⁵⁴ The controlled flood would also damage downstream irrigation infrastructure, including the irrigation dam on the Omo River in northern Bodi land.

It is clear that the controlled flood was never intended to be released, at least not to the extent it was advertised.



Kwegu fishing in the Omo River in 2012, before the end of the annual flood © Will Hurd / The Oakland Institute



Effects on Local People

For years, the Oakland Institute has raised alarm about the conditions and threats that both the Gibe III Dam and KSDP pose for Indigenous communities in the region.⁵⁵ Now, three years after the completion of the dam and seven years after the first plantations were established, fresh field work confirms the disastrous effects in the region.

Field research was conducted in a situation of acute hunger, particularly amongst the Mursi, who should have been planting along the banks of the Omo River at the time. The

end of the flood has caused the Mursi to languish in the plains, trying to sustain themselves with the milk and blood of their cattle and the little grain they exchange their cattle for. Loss of land, conflict with authorities, loss of previous services like food aid and schooling, pressure to abandon livelihood and cultural practices like herding cattle, and the intrusion of government forces into many aspects of the lives of the Mursi, Bodi and Kwegu have also been the results of these projects.⁵⁶ The section that follows details this devastation.



Cattle gathering in the Omo Valley, October 2017 © Kelly Fogel

Broken Promises

Amongst the many broken promises made by the government is the fact that the annual ten-day artificial flood has never appeared.⁵⁷ As a result, the Mursi have become more permanently settled in the central plains of their land, becoming increasingly dependent both on the fickle rains of bush cultivation and on the sale of their cattle to buy grain. The Mursi were also promised irrigated land in resettlement sites where they would be able to grow crops. But the delivery of this promise has also been dangerously inadequate, causing hunger for an already vulnerable population.

The Mursi recalled the promises made by the government:

“‘Now, we are going to give you water,’ they said. ‘We will put it in a pipe and you can pour it on your crops. We will bring water to the cattle, so they can drink...The grain will ripen even during the dry season...You will change and become rich people!’”⁵⁸

Some Mursi, Bodi, and Kwegu moved into resettlement sites, but the 0.25 ha of land allotted per household was insufficient to feed a family.⁵⁹ In one resettlement site, they



cultivated a crop of maize only to have the government convert the area to sugarcane plantations and plow over their plots.

“That’s how they tricked us. They took the Omo River waters and channeled them. They then divided out cultivation sites for the Mursi and poured water on the land. The corn ripened. ‘This is very good,’ we said. When we wanted to plant again they bulldozed the crops. ‘The land will be cultivated by its owner – the government,’ said the officials.”⁶⁰

In other places, the Mursi were required to dig their own irrigation canals, with no help from the government.

“We said that [the resettlement site] is difficult, the work is very hard. We are supposed to dig the canals and there is no shade to sit in. We work in the sun all day. Our hands are heavily blistered from digging irrigation channels all the time. We said leave it. We will cultivate in the bush. If there is rain the sorghum will grow. If the rainy season is dry, then we will be hungry and have to buy grain. We will sell cattle and buy grain.”⁶¹

All the trees had been cut down leaving no shade for respite from the sun. Mursi who moved to the resettlement sites found themselves sleeping out in the plains. The presence of irrigation waters in this malarial area led to an increase in mosquitos.⁶² According to the Mursi, they were also promised schooling, access to health care, grinding mills, food aid, and access to electricity in the resettlement sites.⁶³ Little to none of this ever materialized.

Before the sugar plantations, there were three schools in different provinces of Mursiland and another school started by the mission at Makki village. The three government schools were closed after 2012 and only one was opened within the workers camp.⁶⁴ The Makki school still exists. In the Bodi area of Gura, sporadic teaching happens outside, near the plantations worker’s camp.⁶⁵ A clinic was built there, but the doctor, who is there only once in a while, administers mainly pain relief pills. In the larger population area of Hana, the resettlement sites are virtually empty and there are no government services there.⁶⁶



Suri boy with traditional face painting in the Kibish region of the Omo Valley, April 2018 © Kelly Fogel



Loss of Livelihoods

The government has also pressured the Mursi and Bodi to give up their cattle and abandon their pastoral livelihoods. In the early days of the sugar plantations the then-government even allegedly threatened to seize or kill their cattle.

“‘Sell all your cows for money,’ said the government. ‘If you don’t sell them the government will take them and sell them. If you don’t sell them we will inject them all with poison and they will die off. You will become our servants.’”⁶⁷

But the Mursi refused and soon abandoned the resettlement sites, preferring the unreliable bush cultivation and to tend to their herds.

“The Mursi say, ‘If we go into the resettlement site, how are we going to herd our cattle?’ The government says, ‘Leave pastoralism behind and go to the resettlement site.’”⁶⁸

The Bodi have also abandoned resettlement sites because the irrigation infrastructure didn’t work, leaving them without water for cultivation or even personal use.⁶⁹ Like

the Mursi, lack of shade and general hardship led to under population of the resettlement sites.⁷⁰ The government tells the Bodi at nearly every meeting to keep only two head of cattle at their homesteads.⁷¹

The Mursi and others in the area feel that the government has intentionally attempted to get rid of the Mursi cattle by not addressing cattle disease.

“Now cattle disease has come and the government is not helping us with the cattle. ‘The disease will come and kill all your cattle and you will be without any,’ the government said.”⁷²

There is also a report of *woreda* officials withholding cattle medicine they had in their possession during a recent outbreak of bovine disease.⁷³

The Northern Kwegu have likewise lost their livelihoods. Their territory was almost entirely taken over for sugarcane plantations and most of their forest cut down. They lost the Omo floods for riverbank cultivation and most of the

forest they used for gathering honey and wild plants and hunting. This destroyed their ability to support themselves by a traditional economy and forced them to move into resettlement sites. Some of the men are now employed seasonally by the KSDP, hunting buffalo that eat the sugarcane. They also cultivate their irrigated plots and herd goats to make a living and go to the Omo River to fish.⁷⁴ They live a precarious existence dependent on the whims of the government. In the Gura area, they live in a “pocket of forest surrounded by sugarcane plantations.”⁷⁵ Recently, many Kwegu rejected the resettlement sites, moving out, because of ill treatment by the government.⁷⁶



Bodi and Kwegu weeding a cultivation site, January 2012 © Will Hurd / the Oakland Institute



Loss of Autonomy

By forcing local populations to abandon their livelihoods and adopt more sedentary lives, the KSDP has allowed the Ethiopian government to establish authority over an area that has long evaded state control. Indeed, with what looks to be the economic failure of the plantations, the establishment of political control may be the most “successful” aspect of the plantation plans.⁷⁷ “[The KSDP] is employed not only as a way of transforming sugar production and national economy, ... [but also as] social development schemes as negotiated benefits so as to penetrate the society and to transform the pastoralist communities into a more settled way of life.”⁷⁸ But the government’s rhetoric that the project aims to provide local benefits isn’t fooling the Mursi, who perceive the project purely as political control. This was one of the main reasons they cited for abandoning the resettlement sites.

“The government says, ‘You Mursi are not listening to the government. Go to the resettlement site and stay’ ... ‘Why do you dislike the resettlement site?’ They want us to take in the government’s directions and we should change and become like highlanders. That is what the Mursi don’t like.”⁷⁹

The Mursi believe they will become “the poor servants of the government” if they agree to work as hired laborers in

the plantations and become subject to government control in the resettlement sites.⁸⁰ They have frequently experienced this control. For example, in the 2005 national elections the government came and told the Mursi to mark “the bee” on the ballots, the symbol of the ruling party Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The Mursi did not understand what they were doing. By 2010, some Mursi expressed interest in voting for an opposition party. The local government administration members known as the *woreda* responded by saying “Do you want us to go and get the military?”⁸¹

The Bodi also resent government control of their lives and livelihoods in resettlement sites:

“Once irrigated plots were made available in early 2013, development agents monitored the participants’ fields closely and held the Bodi accountable for any failure to bring the maize to maturity. This monitoring and nagging was resented by the Bodi, because crucial aspects of the farming—the size and location of plots, the type of seed, and the time of planting—were beyond their control. Settlers perceived themselves as occupying a lowly position in a command hierarchy, which grated with Bodi ideals of autonomy.”⁸²

Changing Demographics and Limited Employment Opportunities

When the KSDP was first proposed, the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation predicted that the project would directly create as many as 700,000 jobs, but this too has been a ruse. By early 2016, according to KSDP figures, only about four percent of those predicted had come to fruition.⁸³

The large majority of these jobs have not been given to local communities but instead to migrant workers, arriving from other parts of Ethiopia. These include highlanders from most of the major representative Ethiopian ethnic groups, as well as people from the surrounding ethnic groups such as the Suri, Tishana, Gimir, and Galila, who have come to work in the plantations and live at irrigated resettlement sites.⁸⁴ Migrants have brought more infections of HIV and increased access to alcohol for local people.⁸⁵ The balance of power could also switch in the area as these relatively small groups such as the Bodi, Mursi, and Kwegu become outnumbered in their own land, throwing political

representation from the *woredas* in favor of outsiders.⁸⁶

The jobs that have been made available to the Mursi, Bodi, and Northern Kwegu men have been seasonal and temporary, primarily hunting buffalo that eat the sugarcane. These positions earn approximately 1,400 Ethiopian birr (US\$51) a month.⁸⁷ Work for the KSDP is substantially less attractive for women because the jobs they are offered, removing the crushed sugarcane refuse, pay just 500 Ethiopian Birr (US\$18) per month.⁸⁸

The plantations are also fracturing communities. Recently, groups of Mursi have split into factions of those who benefit from the plantations through employment and those who are against the plantations.⁸⁹ This has caused night shootings, recently leaving six Mursi and seven highlanders dead.⁹⁰





Bodi homestead near the Omo River, January 2012 © Will Hurd / The Oakland Institute

Restricting Food Aid

Deliveries of food aid that were frequent before 2011 have generally diminished or ceased since the onset of the plantation plans. Now, when the Mursi request food aid in times of hunger they are told either to go and plant crops in the resettlement site or to go to school to learn to read and write, skills that would only earn them a living upon completion of high school.

“... if we go to school there are a lot of us who are hungry now and hunger won’t be relieved soon by going to school. The Mursi all agreed about this and they left the school. How are we going to go to school when we are hungry?”⁹¹

This and other actions by the government seem designed to force or entice the local people into resettlement sites. Among the Bodi, food aid was used as a draw to the resettlement sites between 2012 and 2014. After this they

received virtually none, including when they suffered greatly from hunger in 2016 - 2017.⁹²

“The government told us before to move to the resettlement sites. Both the Mursi and the Bodi hated the sites and they left them permanently. They don’t want to be in the resettlement sites. They asked the government to bring them grain. ‘What? You don’t like the resettlement sites? You don’t like going to school? You don’t get any grain,’ said the government. The government repeated that many times and now they left us without grain.”⁹³

The resettled highlanders brought to the area, from Sidama, Wolayta, and other ethnic groups, who were only a few kilometers away from the Bodi, were given food aid at this time.⁹⁴





Trucks transporting industrial turbines for development projects in Ethiopia © The Oakland Institute

Vehicle Incidents

A surprisingly high number of people have been killed and injured by vehicles since the start of the sugarcane plantations. The locals share instances of frequent deaths and people with broken legs can be found throughout Mursiland. According to local people, at least 14 Bodi have been hit and killed and more injured since 2012.⁹⁵ It has been difficult to get exact numbers from the Mursi, but it is an issue on the minds of both the Bodi and Mursi.

“‘Why are the trucks running over people?’ the Mursi say. ‘Do they not see them on the road? ... There are a lot of people on the road in the cities of Addis Ababa and Arba Minch. Why are you always hitting people here?’”⁹⁶

They allege this to be intentional. “The trucks are running fast along the roads. If we move out of the way they veer towards us and hit us,” said a Bodi man.⁹⁷ In one incident, a Bodi man was hit accidentally during the night, but then the driver backed over him to make sure he died. The reporting witness was riding with the truck driver.⁹⁸ In December

2017, a Bodi man was hit and killed by a truck near Mahol in southern Bodi land. Other Bodi retaliated by shooting the passengers, killing at least a dozen highlanders, many who worked for the KSDP.⁹⁹

“The trucks that brought the people, the Bodi shot at them a long time. Government people came and said, ‘Oh, many people have been shot.’ ‘The truck ran over a person,’ the Bodi said. ‘The Bodi man wanted to stop the car to go to Hana, why did you just run over him with the car? ... You have been running over so many people, this time we will kill.’ That’s why they shot them.”¹⁰⁰

This followed a similar incident in January 2012 when, after a spate of injuries where Bodi were hit by trucks, a pregnant Bodi woman was killed by a plantation truck. Her husband’s relatives shot the truck repeatedly and smashed four machines in the workers camp. The military then responded by shooting and injuring two Bodi.¹⁰¹



'OUR MOTHERS YEARN FOR THEIR LAND'

The pain that the loss of the Omo floods has caused the Mursi is illustrated by a song composed by young Mursi women. The song describes the abandonment of different Omo River cultivation sites and the hardship this has brought, particularly on the adult population:

Chirman was abandoned, oh our elders
Tillago was abandoned, oh our elders
Jamaro was abandoned, oh our elders
Let's go back to our land, oh our elders
Let's go back to our fathers' land, oh our elders
Kuduma was abandoned, oh our elders
Our mothers yearn for their land, oh our elders¹⁰²

One Mursi elder, who was the leader of a village where he watched his extended family and other families under his care go hungry, complained bitterly about the situation. "This is terrible. If the flood had come we would be at the Omo now, catching fish. But we are now sitting in the plains with nothing to eat."¹⁰³ When asked about this song he answered:

*"My heart feels bad. Real bad. I feel sad. All these people feel bad when they hear that song. We have abandoned those places. Why are the girls singing that? When we hear the song, everyone gets tears in their eyes. Death is near."*¹⁰⁴



Mursi woman near Mago National Park, October 2017 © Kelly Fogel

Project Fallout

In addition to having devastating local impacts, the KSDP has been an economic disaster. The original 245,000 ha designated for sugarcane plantation in the Omo Valley was quickly reduced to 175,000 ha.¹⁰⁵ In 2016, this was further downscaled to 100,000 ha. Seven years after the project began, only 10,600 ha of sugarcane had been planted and 13,000 ha cleared.¹⁰⁶ Of the six planned sugar factories, only four will be built, and as of October 2018, only two of these, Omo Kuraz II and Omo Kuraz III, were actually operational.¹⁰⁷ While many aspects of the project are still underway, the original Ethiopian Sugar Corporation (ESC) budget for the plantations is nearly expended.¹⁰⁸

The military-run Metals and Engineering Corporation (MetEC), which was responsible for building the Omo Kuraz I sugar factory, is currently mired in a corruption scandal, casting doubt upon whether the factory will be completed. The scandal includes allegations that the company squandered US\$2.8 billion on ten sugarcane factories, none of which were ever finished.¹⁰⁹ In late 2018,



Sugarcane processing factory in the Omo Valley, 2016

27 MetEC officials, including former director general Kinfe Dagneu, were arrested on corruption charges.¹¹⁰ MetEC has also been removed from high profile projects like the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).¹¹¹ It remains to be seen if the company will be removed from the construction of Omo Kuraz I as well.¹¹²



The cost overruns associated with the project are contributing to Ethiopia's wider economic problems. While it has not been possible to obtain exact information on the cost overruns for the Gibe III Dam, statistical analyses of large dams since 1934 suggest a typical schedule overrun of 50 percent.¹¹³ Given the Gibe III Dam's delays – construction began in 2006 and was scheduled for completion by 2012, but the dam's reservoir didn't actually begin filling until

2015¹¹⁴ – this prediction roughly fits, suggesting a doubling of the dam's original cost of US\$1.8 billion.¹¹⁵ This, along with the cost overruns of the sugarcane plantations, not to mention the schedule and cost overruns of the other large dam projects in Ethiopia, including the 6,000 MW GERD on the Blue Nile, are contributing to – rather than addressing – Ethiopia's mounting public debt and a severe lack of foreign currency.¹¹⁶

THE MURSI-BODI COMMUNITY CONSERVATION AREA

In the early 2000s, while the Ethiopian government was pushing forward with its plans for the Gibe III and KSDP, members of the Bodi and Mursi communities were creating their own development plan: the Mursi-Bodi Community Conservation Area. The plan originated after a team of Mursi visited Community Conservation Areas (CCA) of the Samburu and Maasai in Kenya. There they saw local people herding livestock alongside wildlife conservation and using the revenue to build wells and send their children to school. After this trip, the Mursi declared the start of a CCA in a meeting attended by over 300 people. The Mursi convinced the Bodi to join in and later the Northern Kwegu also joined.

The plan for the CCA was to capitalize on the substantial tourist interest developing in the region by building facilities for tourists to stay at and leading wildlife tours. Elephant, giraffe, lion, and Africa wild dog populations, among others, are all species that are dwindling in Ethiopia, but that exist in Mursi and Bodi territories. These territories are also adjacent to the Omo and Mago National Parks.

Both the Federal Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority and the Southern Nations and Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) Culture and Tourism Bureau expressed support for the plan, as it would bolster wildlife protection and tourism for the Omo and Mago National Parks.¹¹⁷ The Mursi completed a map of their territory that included reserves for wildlife conservation. They employed game scouts. They even received a large grant to begin the conservancy. But the government never granted the project legal status.

For the past 11 years, the Mursi have tried to get the government to accept their plan and allow the Bodi, Mursi, and Northern Kwegu to boost both wildlife conservation and tourism potential in the region. Government officials repeatedly told them that the CCA would interfere with the sugarcane plantations¹¹⁸ – plantations that are likewise devastating wildlife populations and have carved out large sections from the Omo and Mago National Parks for cultivation.¹¹⁹

The CCA is but one example of the kind of locally-driven development that should be embraced by the Ethiopian government.

Conclusion

With the completion of the Gibe III Dam, the people of the Omo Valley have lost the largest, most stable, portion of their food production, which they have relied on for centuries – the annual flood of the Omo River. Chronic hunger is now widespread in the valley. Local people are being forced to resettle and abandon livestock herding. With this pressure

to abandon their livelihoods and cultural practices, they also risk losing their culture and identities.

Basic conditions that should have been met before the start of the Gibe III Dam and KSDP – for instance, open and transparent communication, meaningful consultation,



and adequately-funded compensation arrangements such as livelihood reconstruction programs – have all been breached.¹²⁰ In addition, widespread abuse has taken place at the hands of the military and state-run corporations leading the projects. The ill-will that the Kwegu, Mursi, and Bodi have towards the government, because of the abuses, broken promises, and resulting hunger, has made the government untrustworthy in the eyes of local people.¹²¹

This devastating situation must be addressed by Ethiopia's new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed.

To lessen the suffering that is currently taking place, the government must stop forcing local people to abandon their current livelihoods and give up their cattle. It must also stop trying to coerce local people into resettlement sites. In situations where properly-irrigated agricultural land is provided and willingly accepted by local communities, it must allow local people to use this as they see fit, coming and going as they please. Services that existed before the plantations such as food aid, schools, and veterinary services, outside of the resettlement sites, must also be restored.¹²² Beyond these very minimum requirements to lessen suffering, the government must also initiate a

process to support locally-determined and led development projects.

The government must also recognize the massive failure of this project. Seven years after the sugar plantations began in the Lower Omo, what was initially touted as a modern and efficient way of doing agriculture has produced almost no crops. The cost of this disaster is in the order of a billion dollars and the sugar plantations are now being put up for development by foreign contractors.¹²³

Two more dams – the Gibe IV Dam, currently under construction,¹²⁴ and Gibe V, now in the design phase – will further disrupt the Omo River and affect the local populations of the Bodi and Northern Kwegu territories.¹²⁵ Scrapping the plans for both these projects would lessen hardships for local people.¹²⁶

With a new Prime Minister who has made a commitment to human rights and unity in power, attention must be turned to the Lower Omo to address past abuses and usher in a new era of development – one that benefits and includes Indigenous communities, their traditions, cultures, and livelihoods. After years of disinformation, broken promises, and widespread abuse, this is the only way forward.



Mursi girls in the village of Juiey. October 2017 © Will Hurd / the Oakland Institute



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