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Note 13 Development, Cultural Hegemonism and Conflict Generation in Southwest Ethiopia: Agro-Pastoralists in Trouble

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Abstract

This paper discusses the problems of development in Southern Ethiopia and its often adverse effects on local people not seen as part of the political and civic space in the country. The disregard for the rights of, among others, agro-pastoralists that are culturally and ethnically different from the highland core of the country is disturbing and has led to major casualties. The developmental model of Ethiopia needs serious amendment.

The context to the paper is that of state-designed top-down development plans that target agro-pastoralist areas and populations in Ethiopia. They have been implemented since several years. A discussion of the situation in the Southwest, revealing a problematic, non-negotiated process of massive land investment, based on land alienation, displacement of locals, plantation development, and 'villagization'. This largely excludes the voices and interests of local ethnic populations and does not offer them modes of appeal or redress. A clash can be observed between the local agro-pastoralists and the state acting on the perception of terra nullius-like 'empty spaces'. Ethiopia's federal policy of officially according ethnic rights to people is thereby undermined. The government does not pursue broad human development but instead the cult of GDP growth, exclusionist towards local people's livelihoods. While this conflictuous developmental process is comparable to that of many other countries, controversy grows over the short- and long-term social, economic and environmental effects.

Reports of local disputes and confrontations in the past few years indicate an ill-prepared trajectory of land governance and development that endangers use rights and civil rights of indigenous people in the Southwest. They do not seem to qualify as full citizens of Ethiopia. Peoples like the Anywa, Majangir, Kwegu or Suri provide examples. In its political-economic aspects, development in Ethiopia proceeds as a coercive and 'inevitable' process. As a case-study of the Suri (Surma) people illustrates, this 'development' undermines local food security, settlement patterns and livelihood practices, as well as relations between the Suri and neighboring groups. A debatable 'civilizational' dimension is also present in the developmental project, aimed to modify key aspects of culture and behavior of those that the state does see as 'not like us'.

Benefits of expected socio-economic improvements on the regional or national level are hardly if at all visible for small-holders and agro-pastoralists; only state-supported investors and state companies find benefits (though not all), profiting from access to land unilaterally allocated by the government on the basis of its legally 'owning' all the land - being nationalized property, bypassing customary and use rights. The announced 'mitigation measures' for locals displaced are not in sight either.

Problematic local events including violent confrontations in the Ethiopian Southwest show the need for a new, negotiated, model of developmental governance that recognizes rights of local people as citizens, not only subjects, and can engage them in a more encompassing national venture.

Keywords: development, agro-pastoralism, agrarian commercialization, Southern Ethiopia, violence, state authoritarianism, human rights abuse, Suri people, interethnic tensions

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1. INTRODUCTION

The thesis of this study is that the process of 'development' in Ethiopia, carried out by a centralist and authoritarian state, generates not only more GDP growth, export revenue, etc. but also seriously adverse effects on local peoples, often not seen as part of the political and civic space in the country. The disregard for the rights of, among others, agro-pastoralists that are cultural and ethnically different from the highland core of the country is disturbing, and has led to major casualties. The dismal record of one Ethiopian rural region reveals that the developmental model of Ethiopia, while of course having potential, needs serious amendment in some of its assumptions and implementation methods, and requires a rights-based approach.

Since almost a decade Ethiopia is engaged in an overhaul of economy and society via an ambitious model of developmentalism. A comprehensive and aggressive economic policy is pursued, directed by the party-state (cp. Fana 2015), and is manifested in, for example, substantial infrastructural outlays, land appropriation for large-scale agrarian commercialization, industrial investments, healthcare and education facilities expansion, and societal engineering. This is done within the country's hegemonic political framework dominated by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the former insurgent movement turned political party, in power since 1991. Several observers have noted that this developmental overhaul is having substantial results – notably in infrastructural and communications capacity and industrial output (especially via increased foreign investment) - but is less successful in land and agrarian policy. Especially the latter is executed with coercion and regardless of its deleterious effects on equity, human rights, ecology and social consensus. Few if any 'multi-stakeholder' debates about alternative routes or policy decisions regarding the agrarian small-holder sector or the (agro-)pastoralist domain are seen. The country has been marked by persistent disputes and disagreements – kept out of the media as much as possible - over poorly compensated land appropriations, continued food (in)security in many areas, growing environmental problems, local clashes, and political repression stalling the emergence of a representative democratic system that could allow accountability on economic policies.¹

The focus here is on some developments in the agro-pastoralist Southwest, engendered by state governance ideology and land investment policies as they relate to local, 'indigenous' people. We discuss examples of such 'hegemonic developmentalism', related to the wider framework of authoritarian governance and one-party monopolism operative in the country. In Ethiopia, this hegemonism, as an unreflected discursive and operational strategy of social-political dominance, is often deleterious in its effects, its unitary 'one-size-fits-all'-approach, and its disdain for peoples and groups not following the worldview or livelihoods similar to the agrarian- and service economy-based highlanders. It is 'cultural' because of its clearly ideological and moral-evaluative dimension, including its 'harmful customs' discourse and depreciation of agro-pastoral modes of livelihood.

The state policy plans of ethno-federal Ethiopia since 2005, devised by the ruling party EPRDF, reflect an overwhelming emphasis on 'economic growth', 'developmental targets' and 'progress' (e.g., FDRE 2010; UNECA-EU 2013; Planel 2014; Fourie 2015). Much of this

¹ While this report goes to the press, a new crisis erupted in November–December 2015 with the massive Oromo protests against the expansion of the Addis Ababa metropolitan region into the Oromo Regional Nation State (as per the Addis Ababa Master Plan). This caused major disruption and lethal repression, with dozens of people reported killed by security forces as of late December 2015. See: 'Ethiopian forces 'kill 140' in land row over Addis Ababa expansion', AFP news message, 8 January 2016.

discourse is copied in the academic and policy literature, becoming quite dominant at the expense of issues of social justice and political reform. Indeed, the country clearly does show increased economic activity and overall growth on GDP criteria, produced by the huge communication and infrastructure works and external capital inflows via investors attracted by the low-wage economy. Significant changes are being effected in the macro-economic and social setting of the country. A number of Millennium Development Goals have been reached, or were close to being reached, by late 2015. Still, crucial dimensions of human development as well as inclusiveness and civic-human rights notably lag behind. The realities of the developmental process are often mixed if not deeply problematic (cp. Aalen and Asnake 2012). For example, they appear not to work out for minorities, especially in the case of agro-pastoral groups living in areas outside the highlands (e.g. the Afar, Borana, Mursi, Bodi, or Anywa peoples). Many of them seem to be cast as socio-culturally undesirable, backward people that have little to contribute, and their being 'trapped' in subsistence economies is seen as negative. They are often pushed out of lands and modes of livelihood (see Oakland Institute 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Bennett 2013, Davison 2013, Fana 2015; Newsome 2015; Perry 2015). A good number of these groups live in the Ethiopian Southwest, e.g., in the Gambela region, the South Omo zone and the Bench-Maji zone, now undergoing a major metamorphosis (Others are in the Ogaden, Afar and Beni-Shangul regions, see map 1, in the Appendix).

The literature on the problems of this 'developmental state', as Ethiopia defines itself today, is in fact extensive, and the picture that emerges on how this type of governance materializes itself and subverts local livelihood systems raises many questions (compare: Lefort 2012, 2013, Planel 2014, Di Nunzio 2015, Aalen and Asnake 2012)². Central characteristics of Ethiopian state governance are: authoritarian top-down governance, policy imposition, use of coercion, a lack of concern and understanding for local people indigenous to the area, and a neglect of the region's intricate ecology, local economies and biodiversity resources. Indeed, in its massive new agrarian ventures, respect for existing groups' rights and 'sustainability' in the ecological sense is not a prime consideration. And, to cite R. Wright's ironic comment, "...those who have not chosen the true way forward should be made to do so for their own good – by force, if necessary." (Wright 2004: 6).

The current process of economic and political 'modernization' of Ethiopia could of course primarily be seen through the prism of rights abuse and social crisis, because these aspects seem to be an inevitable ingredient (HRW 2012). This is what many more activist critics do and they have a good point: governance is authoritarian and coercive, often abusive, and follows a rather 'mono-cultural' model. The current process can however also be treated primarily as a crucial episode in the social history of the region and its people, generating a pervasive transformation of Ethiopian rural society. This is the perspective taken here - but the problematic aspects of the process are not denied and will indeed be highlighted as well (cp. also Tewolde and Fana 2014; Fana 2015).

The past five-year phase of state-capitalist development in Southwest Ethiopia was based on the 2010-2015 *Growth and Transformation Plan* (GTP), promulgated in September 2010 by the Ethiopian government. This ambitious and large-scale plan aimed to restructure Ethiopia's economy and reinforce the pivotal role of the state in the economy. One of the key aims is "to make Ethiopia a middle-income country by 2025". GTP phase one ended in 2015, and GTP phase two has been prepared and its implementation was announced at the EPRDF Party Congress in September 2015. It is a continuation of the top-down blueprints for state developmental initiatives, leaving little autonomy to the general

² Not mentioning the flood of critical newspaper articles in the global press.

public, the market, the private sector or local-level stakeholders. Again, no change in land management (all remained state-owned), and although investment in the small-holder rural producers (peasants) is announced, nothing in particular is said on the (agro-)pastoralist sector.³ The plans again appear to be strongly dependent on foreign donor funding (grants and loans). No doubt the GTP I has had results up to 2015, but quite uneven and controversial. Among them are substantial infrastructural and hydro-energy schemes (e.g., the Gibe-3 dam), industrial parks (much of it with by foreign FDI), healthcare extension, and growth of the agricultural area under cultivation, output increase, and (commercial) large-scale agriculture. But there is also the ongoing neglect of minorities and pastoralists, the production of pervasive socio-economic inequality, more political control (surveillance), increased local conflict and conflict potential, and strongly negative environmental effects. The latter are hardly taken into account but potentially catastrophic: deforestation, water pollution, uncontrolled waste disposal, and destruction of biodiversity. Democratic debate or control on these developmental and political processes in Ethiopia is also absent, as the ruling party and its executive decide on all matters and do not deem this necessary.

The GTP functions as the holy writ of contemporary Ethiopia and is quite unique in scale and ambitions. Apart from the investments mentioned above, it aims for more political control and 'guidance' of people, and implies the imposition of far-reaching socio-cultural changes on ethnically diverse populations.⁴ The political elite's view of Ethiopia is monolithic, and its idea of rule is determined by a perception of problematic diversity and therefore still conceptualized in terms of the need for coercive control.

This grand developmental process in its methods and cultural hegemonism thus shows continuity with past Ethiopian modes of governance and power practice, but it is more pervasive due to new ICT, military and surveillance technologies, and, not least, by fairly uncritical support by donor countries and institutions. While one would expect some adherence among the latter to broad human development, CSR⁵ or international codes of conduct on land use and acquisition (cp. Strecker 2014) and international investment law (Cotula 2013), let alone human rights respect, this is not really the case. The donor countries (from the West as well as the BRIC countries) are major fans of Ethiopian one-party-state development and GDP growth, apparently in view of Ethiopia's relative stability, regional security issues and the state-led economic strategy.

Below, we examine aspects of change as experienced by local people in the Ethiopian Southwest. The momentous changes and problems faced by the indigenous peoples in that region, while progressive and likely irreversible, require a socio-historical approach. One phase of it is described here in bare outline. The local peoples are ill-equipped to deal with the challenges posed to them and run the risk of being 'written out of history' by the powers that be because they are often seen as (literal) obstacles to development and as culturally backward entities. The James Scott scenario, as described in his influential book *Seeing Like a State* (1998), still applies: the top-down, grid-like approach of central state planning which shows no need for context and adaptation, but applies a one-dimensional view that wants to make people 'legible' in the national project, and, failing that, relegates

3 In the GTP II draft there is again vague talk of stimulating the 'livestock sector', but nothing is worked out in detail; presumably commercialization of 'livestock production' for external markets is aimed at. This misses the point, which is the need to stimulate the agro-pastoralist sector in a comprehensive manner and taking into account the specific environmental conditions that produce its comparative advantages (Cp. Notenbaert, *et al.* 2012).

4 As noted, it was followed by the promulgation of GTP II for 2015-2020, coinciding with a new term of office for the ruling party EPRDF after the May 2015 elections, 'won' with a 100 % score of parliament seats.

5 'Corporate social responsibility'.

them to irrelevance or virtual non-existence. And as Fabiana Li has shown in her recent study (2015) on resource extraction by mining in Peru, state and corporate politics, mining technologies, and local knowledge about the natural environment often clash in the wake of external, state-induced expansive activities in areas formerly used for small-holder agriculture. In Southern Ethiopia, it is primarily large-scale land appropriation and water extraction for huge commercial plantation agriculture that causes problems, not only for small farmers but also for agro-pastoralists.

We do not need again to give the outlines of the processes of massive land alienation, plantation outlays, mega-dam construction, (re)settlement/villagization, road building, ecological 'modification' and mono-cultural agrarian investment schemes in Ethiopia. The theme of the 'clashing' narratives and practices is a familiar one (Markakis 2011, Abbink 2012, Girke 2013), and it is of continued relevance in view of the often quite tragic impacts on the local people (Bennett 2013; Davison 2013; Oakland Institute 2015). In a longer term perspective, it is equally vital to study and assess: 1. The economic-ecological consequences of ongoing modernization, such as new forms of land (ab)use and production with short-term profits, and environmental decline; and 2. The related social and human development consequences: although for some there are new educational resources, widening opportunities and access to new networks, there is also much livelihood loss, social crisis, rights abuse, and group tension. As has been noted in the literature, development is also "...destruction of many features of the to-be-developed society and economy." (Ashkenazi 2012: 92).

The focus here is on these two above themes, giving an update and brief assessment of aspects of 'developmental governance' in the Southwest Ethiopian region, and how it might (but will likely not) be changed for the better. The main illustrative case study here is that of the Suri people in the western Omo Valley area.

Key to the present-day dynamics of socio-economic change, especially in the South, is indeed *land*. Land, as always in Ethiopian history, is the basis of economic production, government power and governance methods, as well as of symbolic power. All land was nationalized in 1975 and was appropriated from its customary users by the state.⁶ No alternative power bases can be built if all land is government property. Land is also 'naturalized' as part of the hegemonic political order, and thus plays a role as instrument in the totalizing control of the population, making citizens dependents. This goes by 'legal' and by forceful means. The process is conflictuous and violent, and we see this in the Southwest also. Because all land is constitutionally state property it can be alternatively disposed of by the state at will, any time. No group or person can make a legal private claim to it, however ancient and entwined they are with the land for livelihood, cultural heritage value, or customary rights. In itself this clause of the state as only owner, dating from the days of the 'Socialist' *Derg* regime and seamlessly continued by the EPRDF regime after 1991, is controversial, if not utterly wrong. It negates the right to property and provides a serious disincentive to people to take care of the land themselves or invest in it. But it is the reigning law. The 1995 constitution, however, states that alienated lands in Ethiopia are to be adequately compensated for: either with other patches of land, or with appropriate financial compensation. We are not aware of any such compensation to local inhabitants of the Omo Valley region, including the Suri, ever having been provided: rather the opposite. 'Mitigation'— a much used NGO and policy term - of the effects of faulty state policy regarding land is in principle possible, but is not part of the state's development dispensation as such. Land is the coveted resource; the people on it are not.

⁶ Even all urban land was declared state property under the current government and is only available for lease.

Despite frequent calls by experts and analysts (e.g., Cernea 2008; Turton 2011, 2012b), few if any of such 'mitigation efforts' to advance social justice or give a fair deal to local people were seen so far.

Interestingly, donor countries and institutions, incl. the World Bank, support this approach of top-down totalizing development – thereby violating their own political principles⁷ and subscribing to the *Realpolitik* of 'the end justifying the means'. Could it be different? Of course: by following the Ethiopian constitution, by following recommendations in the Social Impact studies, by adhering to international HR treaties and the African Human and Peoples' Rights Charter (to which Ethiopia is a signatory), and by better preparing and assessing the environmental and economic prospects of the investment schemes (some of which are already disappointing in their results).

2. Connecting developmental modernization to rights discourse

The wider context of the developmental exercise in Southwest Ethiopia is that of an overconcentration of abstract planning, beyond local realities, and of a fixation on the issue of GDP growth at any cost, concentrated in the large, capital-hungry, infrastructural projects (big dams, roads, top-down planned agrarian plantations, ruthless 'urban renewal'). Donor countries and their DAG (Development Assistance Group, HQ in Addis Ababa), made up of a group of Western countries, accept this course, although some hesitant critiques now and then emerge.⁸

Developmental efforts in Ethiopia - and many other African countries -, while remarkable, seem to stand primarily in the sign of GDP growth *per se*, i.e., the increase of numbers and material indicators, because this is used to generate political momentum and further international donor funding. But GDP is now, as Fioramonti effectively demonstrated (2013), a fetish number that does measure some things only, and not all the relevant dimensions - human values, environmental costs, informal activities and exchange, or development in the wider sense of well-being and social wealth. GDP, the 'world's most powerful number' (Fioramonti 2014) is an 'ideological tyrant' concept with a peculiar history, coming now under increasing scrutiny because it is misleading, incomplete and has illusory aspects (cp. De Vries 2014). The critique of its limited value and ideological 'correctness' is corroborated in full in developmental ventures in Southwest Ethiopia – and once again, this is not unique for Ethiopia only but also seen elsewhere in the world, including the 'developed' world and its paragons, like the USA. As pleaded for by various international organizations and a host of leading development economists, including Amartya Sen (1999, 2009), new measurements are needed, also in view of the ongoing global discussions on rights, entitlements, and on the new UN-declared 'sustainable development goals' (SDGs) that took effect after 2015.

Secondly, implicit in the critique on GDP fixations is the recognition that cultural and political elements always enter into its manipulation. As Jindra recently noted in a major study (2014: 316): "...incorporating cultural differences is absolutely essential to understanding and dealing with inequality". While he wrote primarily about Western

7 As seen in the case of the Anywa people where a World Bank Inspection panel report (World Bank Inspection Panel 2014), written after a complaint was lodged with the Bank in 2012, concluded that much was wrong with its program in Ethiopia (World Bank). But remedial measures did not follow. Seemingly the Bank's interests in Ethiopia are too big for it.

8 See: <http://www.dagethiopia.org>. A recent letter by the DAG to the Ethiopian government expressed some cautious concern on abuses in the South Omo and Bench-Maji areas, see "DAG recommendations following South Omo and Bench-Maji mission", of 20-02-2015 (Ref. DAG/OU/5/2015). See also Vidal 2015 and Davison 2015.

society's challenges regarding the topic, the present paper is an effort to follow the line of thought for a 'developing country' – Ethiopia. The inequality of rights, livelihoods and of cultural values of local ethnic populations in the Ethiopian Southwest is quite visible. Official policy declares the local cultures as 'backward' and not conducive to development as defined by GDP criteria. Social scientific analysis emphasizes that a broader conception is needed, and that reflexive discussions and better policy evaluations of 'real' development are important: regarding well-being, empowerment of locals, and *human* as opposed to merely economic development of 'stakeholders'. There is already a long tradition of social-science studies on processes of socio-economic change, among them the field of 'applied anthropology' since the 1940s.⁹ In the USA, this latter tradition basically started with the reports on Native American Indian cultures in the late 19th century, done by the Bureau of American Ethnology since 1879. Much of the current processes of induced change and top-down development rehearse historical experiences – and mistakes – seen elsewhere (cf. De Wet 2005), and they can be improved by referring to this tradition of academic research.

In the case of the agro-pastoral Suri people and Southwest Ethiopia in general (see fig. 2) we see a process of development-induced change that evokes dislocation, social disarray, cultural erosion, conflict generation, and imposed behavioral change. A new hegemonic 'GDP-regime', with land confiscation, economic 'adaptation' and growing monetization of the local economy, is being established. In the official five-year development plans (GTP I and II) there is talk of 'equitable' development. But in actual practice, the *rights-based* approach needed for that is absent. Attention to rights of local 'stakeholders' in the so-called developmental process is minimal (cp. HRW 2012). This looks like a repetition of the classical 20th century process of top-down, coercive change that we know from dam projects, resettlement projects, land clearings and commercial farming schemes overlaying local livelihood systems, known from across the world. But few if any lessons were learned: as if every country must, or is allowed, to make the same mistakes.

3. How development made its entry in the Maji area¹⁰

The Maji region is part of Ethiopia since 1898 and always was a 'neglected' backwater. The highlanders who arrived came as part of a largely predatory political economy, extracting natural resources and labor (cp. Garretson 1986). Under the *Derg* regime (1974-91), some 'Socialist' development efforts were undertaken, including villagization and resettlement. But the local inhabitants had bad experiences with the state and its representatives, and usually preferred to be left alone.

In the post-1991 era, the new EPRDF government made a reset. The following features of the current phase of 'development' are immediately visible in this previously remote corner of Ethiopia, notably since the last decade:

- new infrastructure. There is a new all-weather road connecting to the centre of the country, and many new feeder roads, from Mizan to Dima to Tulgi and Maji, to go to South Sudan; another from the Jimma-Mizan highway branching off at Wach'a Maji - an entirely new town that sprung up in the last seven years - to Shewa-Bench the Bach'uma (in the Me'en area) to Jemu and Maji towns. The latter is to be extended to the South, eventually to link up with Kenya, and across the Omo River via a new bridge to Jinka (this part was finished in early 2014).¹¹

9 Cp. the journal *Human Organization*, since 1941. See also Rylko-Bauer, Singer and Van Willigen 2004.

10 Field information comes from interviews, field visits, telephone interviews and other sources, 2000-2015. I am deeply indebted to my many interlocutors.

11 The Chinese are building it, and have their workers' camps across the South.

- state appropriation of local land for investment schemes set up by domestic Ethiopian and foreign entrepreneurs, with threats to existing livelihood systems of the 'indigenous', local groups practising smallholder agriculture and agro-pastoralism in a (semi-) subsistence economy.

- a problematic impact of the large Gibe 3 dam project on the local water supply system, as it will reduce the Omo River flood, and most of the remaining water will be taken for irrigation of the new agrarian ventures east across the Omo. The dam was scheduled to go operational in late 2015. These economic-environmental changes in the lower Omo valley river system and water household due to the Gibe-3 damming project created insecure, unpredictable conditions (cp. Carr 2012), and the connected large-scale monocultural agrarian schemes (projected and executed for cotton, maize, sugar, palm oil, jatropha or rubber) will likely have an adverse impact on local ecology: possible negative effects were not adequately inventoried and are not monitored. In her rather alarming report, geographer Claudia Carr (2012) warned for high conflict potential that may be unleashed after completion of the dam and filling of the lake, when it will start to impact on the water levels and ecology of the lower Omo Valley.

- major changes are foreseen in the socio-cultural and livelihoods domains (and already occurring), but they were not seriously assessed beforehand. Some lip service was paid to possible negative effects in the EEPCo¹² impact reports of the Gibe-3 dam, but these were published only two years after building had already begun (They are lacking for the other schemes). Consultations with locals hardly took place, except in 'ritual form', i.e. talks with some of the local district (*woreda*) people, to 'inform' them and 'allow them the possibility to approve'. And if local concerns or objections were voiced at all in such forums, they were not met, as far as we know. Little or no respect for customary patterns of land use or for customary law was in evidence – because these are officially not recognized by state authorities in any positive sense. The 1997 Rural Land proclamation on paper accords rights, but no practical effects are visible.¹³ Fears about declining local food security meanwhile seem to be confirmed.¹⁴

- a strongly increased presence of the central ('federal') state in its military, bureaucratic and regulative forms on the local level; indeed, the development venture is of course an exercise in state building, state expansionism and surveillance (cp. Turton 2010b).

- resettlement of people from poor, overpopulated areas elsewhere in the country to the so-called empty, underused spaces of Bench-Maji and South Omo Zones is increasing, but is leading to tensions and frequent clashes.

¹² Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation.

¹³ See: Proclamation No. 89/1997, 'Federal Rural Land Administration Proclamation', *Federal Negarit Gazet'a* 54, 7 July 1997, p. 629-30:

"A land administration law enacted by each Regional Council, shall:

- 1) ensure free assignment of holding rights both to peasants and nomads, without differentiation of the sexes; as well as secure against eviction and displacement from holdings on any grounds other than total or partial distribution of holdings effected pursuant to decision by the Regional Council,
- 2) assign land holding sufficient for subsistence, to both peasant and nomads [sic], subject to the particular conditions of the locality."

These and other beautiful rules in the Proclamation were not respected; at least nothing is visible on the ground. And the term 'nomads' is inapplicable, because these do not exist in the region. There are only transhumant cattle herders, moving within a quite limited radius. 'Nomads' (*zällan* in Amharic) is a denigrating term in highlander discourse, used in the sense of 'wanderers with no fixed abode'

¹⁴ See S. Postel, "Dam on Ethiopia's Omo River Causing Hunger and Conflict", National Geographic website, 2 December 2015 (<http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2015/12/02/dam-on-ethiopias-omo-river-causing-hunger-and-conflict>, accessed 20 December 2015).

- a large influx of labor-migrants is also occurring: plantation workers, government people, soldiers, non-indigenous gold miners, bar owners, etc. It was announced in the official plans that ca. 400,000 laborers were to arrive for the new sugar plantations and cane-crushing factories. This would be a nightmare scenario, leading to uncontrollable 'urbanization' in the Omo Valley with dismal social and environmental consequences. It also has the danger that local ethnic groups become a minority without rights in what is their own historic land (cp. Tewolde and Fana 2014). The process is already evident in the Suri and Baale areas, within the 'Surma *woreda*' (= district) within the Bench-Maji Zone, with an influx of Northerners, who tend to violently push out local people from the gold-panning sites that the latter had found and exploited in an artisanal manner. It is also seen in the Mursi, Kwegu and Bodi areas east of the Omo River (Salamago *woreda*), where sugar cane plantations have usurped much of the land and natural resource areas already.

4. Challenges: an area of transition

In what follows, an overview will be given of some crucial events of the past five years in the Maji area, with a focus on the Suri people.

The Bench-Maji Zone is in the extreme southwest of Ethiopia, covering some 19,500 km². In the last official census of 2007 it was said to have 659,046 inhabitants (more than the South Omo Zone), with 24,595 in the Surma *woreda*, where most Suri live.¹⁵ The Zone is populated mostly by 'indigenous'¹⁶ ethnic groups: Me'en, Bench (the largest), Dizi, Ngalam (of Murle descent), and the Suri (Chai, Tirmaga and Baale), and further south, some of the Nyangatom. In the towns nearby – and in some just outside the Zone – like Mizan, Aman, Tum, Maji, Jeba, Bach'uma, Jemu and Gachit¹⁷ a growing mixed population is found, many of highlander descent (Oromo, Amhara, Tigray, Gurage, a.o.). In addition there are large numbers of ex-drought victims in the vicinity: for instance, people from Wollo who were resettled there in various rural areas, e.g., between Bach'uma and Jemu towns, along the new 2011 tarmac road. Population growth in the Zone itself is high (> 3% p.a.), reflecting exponential increase. Land scarcity is growing and is already contributing to deforestation and loss of biodiversity.

Maji, named after the highland territory (*masht*) of the Dizi people, has always been a difficult and violent area since the imperial conquest of 1898. It became an unpopular frontier region where army and administration people from the highlands were sent as punishment, already in imperial times. It has kept this reputation until today.¹⁸ Administrators I talked to in the *Derg* period always described the Maji area as 'uncivilized' and populated by 'uneducated, violent, uncontrolled people'. The perception is exaggerated but still prevalent among today's policymakers as well – who see Maji as a country allegedly in need of everything, notably 'civilisation' and education.¹⁹ Ethiopia's official cultural policy²⁰ – a part of the post-1991 ethno federal order – is inoperative

15 The surface area of Surma *woreda* is ca. 4790 km².

16 I.e., here meaning: pre-1898 imperial state conquest inhabitants who lived there for ages and having special socio-cultural and economic bonds to the land.

17 And since ca. 10 years, also in Kibish town, within Suri territory.

18 Although nowadays big salary inducements by the government also bring new people to the area to work in state projects and the local administration.

19 And reflected in the late PM Meles Zenawi's curious speech of 25 January 2011 on the 13th 'Pastoralist Forum' in Jinka, Southern Ethiopia, where he said, talking on the South Omo region: "I promise you that, even though this area is known as backward in terms of civilization, it will become an example of rapid development". Some aspects of this paradoxical situation were explored in Epple and Thubauville 2012, and the special *Paideuma* issue of which their paper is the Introduction.

20 See the document FDRE 1997, 'Cultural Policy', objectives, 1, 5, 7 and 8 (pp. 25-26), point 2.15 (p. 32), and point 12.2 (p.38).

here, because any respect accorded to ethnic culture and heritage is made subservient to the 'development needs' of the country, of course as determined by the one-party government.

The Bench-Maji Zone is part of the area to be transformed into a massive block of commercial agriculture by foreign investors and by and domestic enterprise under the state-led Kuraz Sugar project, which is already well in progress east of the Omo River, having taken virtually all the land of the indigenous Bodi-Me'en people (ca. 7,500). According to the blueprints (see Fig. 3) the north-western part of the Omo Park in the Maji-Bench Zone was also scheduled for sugar plantations (Clearing started in 2015).

Most described in the critical literature so far are developments in the South Omo Zone, which has borne the major brunt of state-capitalist investment and political expansion since 2010, with the new infrastructure outlays, the huge Kuraz sugar plantation of the monopolistic Ethiopian Sugar Corporation (SRC), with as partner the Metals and Engineering Corporation (MeTEC, a Party/Army company)²¹, and the private investors, thrown as a huge net across the Zone. As we know, some 175,000 ha. are since 2010 being developed, primarily for sugar-cane production (state and private).²² All on indigenous lands that were in use by locals, although extensively (transhumant herding, shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering, apiculture).

As noted, the region will face additional serious livelihood consequences of the completed Gibe dam, with irrigation schemes and reduced water flows undermining the local flood retreat (river bank) cultivation systems, and with a planned shrinkage of pasture lands and local water resources due to massive irrigation needs for the plantations and projected new towns (cp. Avery 2012, 2013).

In addition, cattle-herding as a way of life is being seriously hindered, with authorities pressing for a maximum number of animals imposed per 'household'. Tourism, which had been taking up since 10-15 years (although not without its problems), is affected as well, and will likely die a quiet death as the plans proceed. This happens mostly east of the Omo River, but in mid-2014 a large area west of the Omo River, on land used by Me'en and Chai-Suri people for agriculture and livestock herding, was also confiscated and is being developed for new sugar cane plantations. Since 2011-2012, tourist numbers have sharply dropped in the area west of the Omo.

The Suri (Tirmaga and Chai sub-groups) are about 34,000 people and live as extensive cattle herders and shifting cultivators in the less fertile and somewhat more arid plains and foothills west of the Omo River (cp. Abbink, Bryant and Bambu's 2013 monograph). They are largely self-sufficient, and when faced with periodic droughts and cattle diseases in the recent past they were largely able to overcome them with their own means. Their cattle herds and their mobility enabled them to survive. While the Suri are a global 'celebrity tribe' - much photographed and the subject of countless documentaries and tourism journal articles and books²³ - in Ethiopia they are still seen as 'primitive and backward', almost as an embarrassment. This goes for the government as well as the general urban,

21 The state-owned MeTEC, led (at the time of writing, in late 2014-early 2015) by Brig.-General and TPLF-member Kinfu Dagneu, is constructing the five new sugarcane crushing factories. The director of the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation (2014-15) is Mr. Shiferaw Jarso, a former EPRDF (OPDO) leader and ex-Vice-Minister in the federal government.

22 According to maps of the official Kuraz ESC plans, however, the total surface for future sugar plantations and related private agrarian investments is ca. 300,000 ha. Probably more will follow.

23 Cp. Beckwith and Fisher 1991; Feron 2008; Silvester 2008, 2010.

'educated' public. In terms of geography, economy and culture the Suri are at the margins of the margins.²⁴

The area west of the Omo where they live comprises the Sai plains east of the Sai mountain (in Dizi territory), which is where they herd cattle and do river bank cultivation, in conjunction with Mursi people, to which they are culturally closely related. Also the area around the Kibish River, the Kaya and the Koka rivers to the west and northwest are used by them. The Suri also do hunting and gathering in the more southern areas toward the Illib'ai hot springs (which is an important ritual place for them) and the Omo National Park. The regions from Maji town north, south and west toward the Sudan border is thus where most Suri live and have their main cattle herds. They used to let them graze well into the Sudan, a practice now difficult due to raiding threats by the Toposa, a numerous South Sudanese agro-pastoral people who established themselves on the Ethiopian border since the mid-1990s and have been raiding across it ever since.²⁵

According to the major 2006 FEWS-Net study on the Southern Region (2006: 34, 185), the Suri "...depend more for their living on livestock than on agricultural production, and have managed to maintain a food secure economy." And: "...livestock sales [...] bring households from half to three-quarters of their cash. Otherwise they sell some honey, and make significant money from working in neighboring gold mining areas." So, although there always were threats in the form of livestock disease, insufficient rainfall, and inter-group conflict (raiding for cattle), this was a materially simple but *not* an impoverished or declining economy, be it that it was neglected by subsequent governments in service provision and infrastructure. It could have been developed via government support for livestock disease control, training, protection against foreign raiders on the border, and market development. This did not happen; instead, the choice for a phasing out of agro-pastoralism was made, causing more insecurity, reduction of access to food and water sources, income reduction, and misery.

When talking about Suri futures, three problems seem now paramount for them:

1. the wider impact of the Gibe-3 dam and the external commercial-agrarian investment schemes on their livelihoods (i.e., on cultivation sites, hunting-gathering and herding areas)
2. the government's programme of resettlement/villagization and political control, which is changing their social structure and economic base for the worse.
3. in addition, there is a continuation of the long-standing problems of tension with neighbouring ethnic groups such as the Nyangatom, Dizi, and the Sudanese Toposa, despite some government and NGO efforts to mediate truces in 2007, 2011 and 2013. Since the late 1980s, when the problems (cattle raiding, killings and robbery) escalated, Suri never got government support to protect them from the 'Bume' – i.e., the Nyangatom and Sudanese Toposa raids. Security was their own responsibility, defended at high cost. Below, the first two points will be discussed in more detail, with attention to the third in section 5.

²⁴ Important to note is that there is no civil registry in Southwest Ethiopia: no registration of births and deaths of named individuals, meaning that also on paper many rural people are still 'invisible'. The government never saw it as a priority to set up such a registry.

²⁵ The Ethiopian government after 1991 never took protective action to defend its territory or peoples - notably the Suri and the Baale - against the Toposa attacks. See also this report by the independent Ethiopian Human Rights Council: *Another Ethnic Conflict in Bench-Maji Zone. 66th Special Report* (Addis Ababa; EHRCO, 15 October 2003), p. 2, where the same issue was already mentioned.

The dam and the plantations²⁶

The areas west of the Omo escape the immediate impact of the Gibe-dam (except for river-bank cultivation near Sai), but the Kuraz Sugar Project master plan envisaged the cultivation of 81,000 ha. around the Illib'ai springs, more than half of this surface even being carved out from the existing Omo National Park, as well as of the northern 'Block 1' of 82,000 ha., also in the Park (see Fig. 3). This is near the eastward bend of the Omo, bordering the Me'en land. Here also the Suri will lose pasture and cultivation sites. This is part of the 'downstream impact' problem (cp. Richter *et al.* 2010; Turton 2010a).

The agrarian scheme that has so far affected the Suri most was the large Malaysian-owned Koka plantation, just north of the Surma *woreda* capital of Tum and northwest of Maji in the Akobo valley/savannah area, in the middle of pastures and water sources used by the Suri. This plantation was being prepared since late 2010 by a Malaysian company owned by Dr. Lim Siow Jin²⁷ and was to comprise 31,000 ha. Although it started with maize cultivation to 'prime' the land, plans were to grow palm oil, mushrooms, sesame, and rubber trees. 'Preparation' of the land further meant the wholesale destruction of all trees and bush on the entire surface of the plantation, including trees of great use for the Suri. Suri never eradicate or destroy the trees but cut and trim them for use so that they can grow again, and make their fields in between. This ecological damage was deeply resented. The Koka area land was previously dry season grazing land for thousands of Suri cattle, and the river Koka was used to water the animals. Most of it was diverted by the plantation and caused water scarcity for the Suri cattle.²⁸

The plantation was off-limits, cleared of people held at bay by armed guards. There was talk of eventually importing 40,000 laborers. But in late 2013 about 250 people were employed on it, with only a few Suri, those who had no longer a choice and had lost land and cattle. The plantation thus developed as a kind of armed *enclave enterprise* – with little effort at contact or negotiation with the local users of the land. It was said that every bulldozer on the plantation was guarded by 2 to 3 army soldiers (Oakland Institute 2013a). Suri were prevented from moving with their cattle close to the plantation, and in skirmishes attacked guards in 2011 and 2012 and killed six or seven at least. Police and guards also killed Suri in return. The plantation received additional army protection. In 2013-14, a total of some 130 heavily armed soldiers were in the plantation area.

The Suri, who saw a major part of their pasture gone and the local paths or routes destroyed, still tried to continue using the plantation area, e.g., by occasional penetration into the plantation and taking the maize. Then a ca. two-metre deep ditch was dug around the plantation, at high cost; and more guards were put in service. The plantation owner paid local taxes to the Dizi district authorities, and local workers, mainly young male and female Dizi, found employment there.

The Malaysian owners no doubt expected that the local situation was stable and would be 'taken care of' by the government, but they were disappointed. The costs of guarding, and the enduring tensions and dangers, made the owners finally give up the plantation.

²⁶ A brief Oakland Institute report on the problems of the Suri (2013) discussed their problems, but it is unsatisfactory and incomplete.

²⁷ His multinational company is also known as DXN International, producing agrarian products, personal care products, and food supplements, and more (See: <http://www.dxn2u.com/corporate/founder.php?lang=en>, accessed 10 November 2014).

²⁸ For more on the Koka plantation: see Dietmar Temps, http://dietmartemps.com/travel-blog/suri-people-under-pressure-the-malaysian-plantation-in-koka-ethiopia_500/.

Perhaps the low profit margins also played a role.²⁹ They closed it down and started leaving in late February 2014. By mid-2014 it was effectively abandoned. Mistakes by the government and naiveté or ignorance (on conditions in Ethiopia among the Malaysians) were additional causes. A costly waste of human lives and resources, due to lack of respect for local people, abuse and ignoring the law, was what remained.³⁰ No doubt the government has found new investors to take over (see note 51), and no doubt again without involving the Suri to work out a collective, symbiotic management of the area in good 'neighbourly' relations. But even if no investors would have come, the land would take years to recover to be of use to Suri or other locals. After the tacit closure of the Koka plantation, a new contingent of government people from Mizan and Hawasa (SNNPRS capital) came to Kibish, the 'capital' of the Surma *woreda* (district), already in March 2014 to study the situation, call meetings, and to prevent Suri taking possession of Koka, by pre-emptive arrests. They came (in 13 vehicles) with a new military force, the so-called 'Addis Kefteгна', elite units, which were put up in the Kibish area.

In addition to the Koka plantation, there have been smaller investment schemes by foreign and domestic entrepreneurs, as well as government plans to 'villagize' local people and to reduce if not eliminate agro-pastoralism and cattle-herding (to be discussed below).³¹

Also one other Suri livelihood activity, gold panning in the local rivers, which was originally developed by them since Italian times, is targeted by highlanders supported by the state. Field observation in the early 2000s already revealed that some EPRDF soldiers had entered the informal gold trade, and at present (2013-15) the local Suri gold panners (young men and women, working in groups) are virtually prohibited from panning. They are pushed out of the business by the army and militia-protected highlanders and townspeople. Most of these are new immigrants, who can be controlled and taxed better. We see here the continuation of a well-known historical pattern of highlanders appropriating the productive economy of the local people - with tacit or open state support.

The resettlement/villagization effort

Resettlement and villagization have a long history in Ethiopia, and have two forms: voluntary and involuntary, i.e., guided by state planning. The experience under the previous regime of the *Derg* was not positive and was marked by large-scale human suffering. Under the EPRDF government of today there are again massive plans for resettlement of people from 'overcrowded', 'exhausted' agrarian areas to 'pristine lands' in the South and for putting dispersed people together in new, large villages. This second form of planned and coerced movement and resettlement is in fact resuscitated on a large-scale by the present government.

The current wave of resettlement and villagization efforts in South Omo and Maji-Bench

²⁹ Also, one of the flagships of foreign leased land projects in Ethiopia, the big Karuturi farm in Gambela, went into serious trouble by 2013 (see <http://farmlandgrab.org/post/view/23165>), and its Ethiopia branch folded in 2014. See also: 'Large land deals reportedly fruitless', in: *Capital* (Addis Ababa weekly), 26 March 2014 (online: <http://farmlandgrab.org/23311>, accessed 4 September 2014).

³⁰ An interesting report was prepared in 2010 by members of the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority (Cherie, *et al.*, 2011). It is difficult to read but has a lot of implicit criticism on the government plans and their threat to the Omo and Mago national parks. The report was completely ignored.

³¹ Compare Mr. Aberra Deressa, a State Minister for Agriculture, in 2010: "...at the end of the day we are not really appreciating pastoralists remaining as they are. We have to improve their livelihood by creating job opportunities. Pastoralism, as it is, is not sustainable. We want to change the environment." Cited in: E. Butler, 'Land grab fears for Ethiopian rural communities', BBC news message, 16-12-2010 (www.bbc.com/news/business-11991926).

But 'unemployment' is a non-existent problem in the region, because all people are employed/engaged in the 'informal' economy, embedded in local society.

zones is clearly also a result of the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) of 2010-15, and will be continued. The indirect effects and its conflict potential in one region, the South Omo Zone, have been discussed by Tewolde and Fana in their quite interesting though ambivalent paper (2014). Much of what they said could be replicated west of the Omo, in the Dizi, Suri and Me'en territory. I limit myself here to the Suri.

In February 2012 the first resettlement plan for the South was announced: for 103,000 people.³² As we saw, resettlement and villagization are often conflated. In fact there is both resettlement of people from other areas and ethnic groups in the Southwest, such as of Konso people in the Mursi and Bodi area (ca. 6,000-7,000 people having arrived in the past years), and of drought victims from the north in the Me'en and Suri areas (several tens of thousands).³³ What is happening in the Suri area is properly called villagization, *i.e.*, state-induced settlement of the Suri themselves, who live dispersed in smaller hamlets and cattle camps according to economic needs and seasonal possibilities. The new villages were allegedly to be equipped with amenities and services, but this is hardly visible so far.

This settlement of Suri is developing in a two-pronged way: a) reinforcing the small town of Kibish, the Surma *woreda* capital, to make it a typical rural Ethiopian town with a local state bureaucracy and a police/militia force, and b) villagization of Suri in seven (some sources speak of three) designated villages and predictably to turn them into sedentary farmers. But the amount of land to be allocated to them – in itself a bizarre irony, being 'given back' their own land - is pitifully small: only 0.5 to 0.75 hectare. This is inadequate for sustenance and/or cash crops, and amounts to an institutionalization of rural poverty. There is also worry about the rapid deforestation around the new settlement sites. The effect of this 'settling' of Suri and other agro-pastoralists is neither in line with the alleged government policy to be 'ecologically conscious', nor with recent (unrealistic) announcements to do re-forestation.³⁴

The town of Kibish is developing as a kind of *enclave* in Suri territory, reminiscent of the imperial-time *kätämas* (fortified villages), the settlements of northern conquerors. Ministries' branches, tax service, local council, agricultural extension, a military contingent, etc. were installed, not to speak of bars and brothels emerging. The Kibish administration is supposed to be led by local Suri as the majority ethnic group or 'nationality'; but this is not the case: so far, the Suri were bypassed for real executive and administrative functions. All vital positions are in the hands of highlanders and ruling party-men. Always, 'lack of capacity' is cited as the reason. But qualified Suri (nurses, office workers, even one accountant) have a hard time in getting a salaried post. The current 'chairman' of the Council (2014-15) is a 10th grade Suri young man who is fully dependent on the non-Suri members in the Council (who are the majority). The administration is also on a 'civilizing mission' that comprises not only villagization and the fostering of sedentary agriculture,

32 "SNNR plans to benefit a hundred thousand pastoralists", WIC (Addis Ababa) news message, February 27, 2012. The message says: "The Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' (SNNP) Regional State, as part of the government's resettlement plans, is working to resettle 103,000 members of pastoral communities this budget year. The regional administration has now finalized the registration process based on the full consent of the communities involved..." The latter remark must not be taken literally.

33 As usual, the Ethiopian government does not seriously entertain policy on one of the root causes of underdevelopment and food and resource scarcity: the alarmingly high population growth of ca. 2.8 % per year. Cp. Dyer 2009, Sahlu 2004, John 2011.

34 See: Zerihun Getachew, 'Ethiopia: Nation to Plant Eight Billion Trees', Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency message, 8 June 2014. Also: Zeryhun Kassa, 'Ethiopia: Norway, WB Finance Ethiopia's Land Management', Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency message, 3 September 2013. Such messages regularly appear and bring in the donor money, but the plans for 'sustainable land management' and 'forest protection' have no noticeable effect on Ethiopian landscapes in the east and south of the country. In the North (e.g., Tigray), however, land rehabilitation and re-forestation have shown successes.

but also abolishing so-called harmful customs,³⁵ do 'clothing campaigns', disarm the locals, and work toward reducing Suri cattle herds and gold-panning activities. The subtext is to disempower the Suri and reduce their wealth and thereby, as one administrator said, their so-called 'arrogance' (in Amharic: *t'igab*). It is to try and negate their independent and self-conscious behavior. In this respect, Suri are often blamed for the violence in the Zone (killings, raids), but neighboring groups and highland villagers are also involved and sometimes engage in provocations as well. The justice system and crime investigation are biased and deficient in this region.

Unfortunately, in the entire development venture no effort is made to use and build on the Suri potential, their cattle herding, agrarian, and trading skills, their ecological knowledge, or their possible role as wildlife stewards (e.g., for tourism) – apart even from their rights as citizens and as original inhabitants of the area. However, one cannot doubt that when for instance better market channels for agrarian produce or for cattle sale/trade would be available to the Suri – or be presented as an option – they would gradually take it. Meanwhile, to take away the cattle wealth of the Suri (see Fig. 4) is to impoverish them, because apart from having vital socio-cultural functions in the social fabric, the animals figure as 'money in the bank', which they exchange in times of duress. As many Suri informants said, the forced reduction of herd sizes is thus leading directly to 'making them poor', increasing food insecurity, and creating a dependency on these eternal food hand-outs, which never come on time, are humiliating, and consist of inferior quality grain.³⁶ Clearly, poverty, in Amartya Sen's 'wider definition of 'inadequacy of capability', - getting poorer materially *and* not being able to do much about it because capabilities to act are taken away (see also O'Hearn 2009) – appears to be *produced*. But in this case it seems to be rather the result of *structural* processes categorically undermining local people's capacity to act and resist, rather than individual failure to respond to the problems.

There is allegedly no 'official' link between the villagization program and the expansion of commercial agriculture via plantations for foreigners and for the METEC, but in practice, in the field, there seems to be. Local people are to make room for the plantations - cp. the Koka plantation on pasture lands - and are expected in the future provide part of the handy, close-by manual labor force. In the Bodi area, east of the Omo, the process is well under way and virtually all Bodi (also agro-pastoralists) have lost their cultivation sites and pastures due to the Kuraz Sugar plantation, which goes right up to the Omo River banks, leaving nothing for crop cultivation and the riverine forest with its useful species. As a result, the Bodi and Kwegu³⁷ people are already suffering from food deficiency and social disarray. They are hardly employed on the plantations except for a few guards and manual workers. This gave rise to conflict.³⁸ Also the environmental effects of the new monoculture schemes are immediately visible in the decline of soil nutrient status and of biodiversity (in flora and fauna).³⁹

35 Apparently, the government and its administrators seem not to see, for instance, the constant *ch'at* chewing, hard alcohol drinking in *t'ajj-bets*, prostitution, watching of questionable videos/DVDs and TV programmes, etc. of town dwellers as harmful customs. These activities, previously unknown among Suri, are rampant in the new towns and will eventually have an impact on them.

36 It has to be noted that apart from an occasional crisis caused by exceptional drought and sometimes cattle disease – i.e., external factors -, the Suri were a functional subsistence economy and not poor or dependent on food aid, charity and relief, and never were. They cannot be compared with notorious cases like the Turkana (cp. Bersaglio, Devlin & Yap 2015).

37 A small group of ca. 800-1000 people, living without livestock in vulnerable agricultural areas, and strongly dependent on riverbank cultivation.

38 See for example: 'At least 29 people from Bodi tribe reportedly killed at the hand of Federal Police', ESAT News, 11 April 2014 (online: <http://ethsat.com/2014/04/11/at-least-20-bodi-people-feared-to-have-died-at-the-hands-of-federal-police-party/>, accessed 2 June 2014).

39 To mention one example: the rooting out of all trees in the plantation areas leads to the loss of sources of food

The process of villagization is said to be voluntary, but pressure is used so that people will have no option left but to go to the new villages. The Suri had no say on the location of the seven sites prescribed or on whether they could opt out of them. Interviews confirm that not participating is no option.

This settlement programme (in Amharic known under the notorious name *säfära program*, a replica of what the local population knew under the *Derg* regime before 1991) is even being carried out with foreign donor funding under the 'Pastoral Community Development Project' (PCDP) - which unfortunately is not about 'community development' at all.⁴⁰ Monitoring by the fund givers is, however, not done, and the government spends the money to its own liking. The essential trait of creative *mobility* of the Suri agro-pastoral economy is undermined, and its advantages in terms of productivity, risk spreading and preservation of biodiversity are denied.⁴¹

From preliminary data on the Suri households close to the plantation and the resettlement projects it appears that malnutrition and misery of households have increased. People have less access to cultivation sites and the cattle give much less milk so that the diet is notably impoverished. Food aid promised as 'compensation' for interruptions in food production due to resettlement and herd downscaling was hardly delivered, if at all. Many Suri would like to move out towards the Sudan but the problem is: the Toposa threat.

5. Conflict generation – a record of violence

Since the 1898 imperial conquest and the subsequent predatory economy based on raiding, (cattle and people), the labor-serf system, resource exploitation, and land confiscation, the Maji region has always been conflict-prone, with a weakly established justice system. But in the wake of the above-mentioned state presence and developmental assaults, conflicts have not diminished. The Bench-Maji Zone and the Ethio-Sudan border region have been unstable zones since many years. The *Derg* period up to 1991 was also highly problematic. But during post-1991 state activities and developmental schemes conflict has morphed into new and often harsher forms.

One dimension of conflict is the 'disciplining', repressive force of the state. Another is an intensification of local-level *inter-ethnic* tensions. They were already there: between Dizi and Suri, Suri and Me'en, Sudanese Toposa and Suri, Nyangatom and Suri, and immigrant village people vs. indigenous groups. Next to others, Suri were responsible for a significant number of incidents (raids on the Dizi, robbery, killings). But these conflicts have continued and were sometimes aggravated. The distrust between groups (also between Me'en and Suri, and Me'en vs. the government and townspeople) is related to the memories of slavery and raiding that marked the Maji area in the past, as well as to other government abuse already in imperial and *Derg* times. Suri, for instance, remember in remarkable detail the incidents of past raiding and killings of which they have been victim since early 20th century

(used in times of scarcity) as well as of indigenous medicine species. E.g., the African olive tree (*Olea europaea africana*), known to be effective in malaria prevention, is already under serious threat. See also Tilahun and Mirutse 2014. Angassa *et al.* (2012), in a detailed soil properties analysis, already noted that savannah lowlands of southern Ethiopia are much more suitable to extensive livestock herding than for other forms of land use, including crop cultivation. Herding (and periodic burning) enhanced soil conservation, sustainability and biodiversity.

40 The World Bank, in another characteristic uncritical move, supports Phase III of the PCDP since December 2013, and poses no questions about abuses or coercive aspects of the programme.

41 On economic grounds this trend is better reversed, and the outmoded 1960s' views on (agro-) pastoralism as not viable or economically 'backward' to be avoided (See: CDE 2015; also Abbink, Askew, *et al.* 2014).

imperial times until today.⁴² They keep a mental record of these violent events between them and -neighbouring groups and with the government, and are said to take revenge on perceived killers or their families “when the time is there”. Current practices of violence are linked with disputes and clashes regarding the land investment schemes and certain state policies imposed on Suri and other local populations.

In the current phase of investments and government projects, marked by a lack of transparency and an absence of accessible official documents, the Suri are suspecting the Dizi or their *woreda* to have made deals with the government or with investors at their expense. This distrust and lack of transparency is endemic, and the government makes little effort to prevent tensions between local people or elites. Local informants even suggest that the government is actively playing upon the traditional tensions between the Dizi and the Suri to be able to wedge in as ‘neutral’ party, establish or impose a so-called government peace, and take the resources needed. In reality, they are a prime cause of unrest and abuse. Suri and Me’en informants also complain of the biased court judges (all non-Suri, and many of them Dizi) in the *woreda* and zone courts, proclaiming disproportional verdicts against the Suri on flimsy evidence. This was, for instance, the case with a Suri youth leader in 2013, perceived to be an ‘anti-government rebel’ only for having questioned the wisdom of resettlement and land confiscation without negotiation. He was sentenced to an exorbitant 16 years in prison in a dubious ‘trial’. Other young Suri have escaped to Sudan and further afield, probably leaving the Suri area for good. One more instance of government bias and injustice was an incident in August 2013: Suri herders had stolen ca. 20 cows from a Dizi village near Jeba. After a Dizi complaint to the authorities in Mizan town - above the Surma *woreda* authority - a big force of 80 police was sent to the area and from the very first group of Suri cattle herders they met – but who had nothing to do with the raid – they took 60 cows. The Suri boys fought back to defend the herd, and in the skirmish killed the Mizan police chief commander (who was from the Bench ethnic group). Mayhem followed, with many Suri arrested and taken away and the cattle not returned. Suri high school kids in Mizan, a town in Bench ethnic territory, were attacked and beaten up by fellow students.⁴³

I here treat a few telling incidents of interlocking violence in the past few years that mark the group distrust and the disregard for rights and human life in the area, as well as the absence of effective government action.

a) On 11 February 2012, there was a killing of ca. 35-50 Suri people, including women and children in the Maji town market place, with machetes, clubs and stones perpetrated by local Dizi and townspeople. Later, another 6 to 10 Suri were found dead on the roads outside the town.⁴⁴ This was also mentioned on the blog of a photographer, but the figures may not all be accurate.⁴⁵

This appalling case of mass killing appeared to have been a ‘revenge’ for the killing of three Dizi *woreda* officials from Maji, including a popular Dizi man, Shalu, on 10 February by Suri in a skirmish near the Koka plantation. This team of officials who had been demarcating with GPS the border of the plantation between the Dizi and Surma *woreda* near the locations of Goltang and Banka, and marking homes and trees with white paint.

42 Among them, a big massacre in the *Derg* period (late 1980s), but even incidents from the Italian period (1936-41) were remembered.

43 Interviews, Addis Ababa, October 2014.

44 This mass killing replicated almost literally one that occurred in early 1991. Then also, in the Maji market place, several dozen Suri, mostly females and children, were massacred on account of false rumors.

45 See: http://dietmartemps.com/travel-blog/suri-people-under-pressure-the-malaysian-plantation-in-koka-ethiopia_500/, accessed on 19 December 2013.

But these Suri killed in Maji, largely women and children, did not know anything about the previous incident at Koka and were attacked by robbers and townspeople. Some of these were incited by the emotions at the burial of Shalu that was going on elsewhere in town on the same day. The police and army did not participate in the killings, but did nothing to stop them. Bizarrely enough, a radio call made by the Suri council chairman who witnessed the shootings in Goltang to Kibish *woreda* headquarters, in order to warn Suri *not* to go to the Maji market the next day, was received by the vice-president and real power-holder (a non-Suri) in the Surma *woreda*, but he did *not* transfer the message to the Suri.

On the next day, 12 February 2012, the Dizi village of Karsi,⁴⁶ was attacked by Suri: five Dizi were killed and many houses burnt down. After this happened, the army was sent in, and again additional casualties followed.

Worrying for the Suri was that the government and apparently also the plantation owners had made the Dizi into their allies, e.g., employing them as workers and 'favoring' them. The plantation was paying some taxes to the Dizi *woreda* (although this *woreda* is not the territory containing the entire plantation). Dizi were also urged to beat up Suri people, e.g., in prisons, and - as we saw - in an attack on innocent Suri market visitors. The authorities again showed themselves biased and irresponsible by allowing the incitement of one group against the other.

Violence is also produced in the context of appropriating other local resources by newcomers, notably the artisanal gold mining: government-affiliated highlanders and even soldiers have muscled in. Legality and reason are absent. Major clashes and killings have been the result.

b) In February 2012 in the Baale area, down from Jeba town, government forces reportedly killed 47 Baale people near the gold rivers (e.g., Kari River and Batale River). They had been called for a meeting and then the soldiers opened fire on the people present, after an alleged dispute, provoked by the soldiers or administrators. The government people said: 'Why are you here, we do not want you here. Go back to Sudan where you came from'. But this area was long settled and used by the Baale ('Kachipo'), who have lived for ages both in Sudan *and* in Western Ethiopia.

c) In October 2012 even worse killings occurred, including of women and children, in the area near Seeli (or in Suri: Ora-chaga), also down from Jeba village, near traditional gold panning places and cultivation sites. Local people alleged that starting on 4 October in the villages of Beyahola, Cholowamale and Garsana, in Baale country west of Tulgi village, some 145-170 people were killed by soldiers, taking place in a period of some two weeks. This was the worst massacre seen so far, and done in a quite appalling manner. Many women and children and even elderly were even among those killed. A few survivors said their hands were first tied up behind their backs and then they were shot, with again similar insults shouted about their being aliens/foreigners. Some children were tied up and thrown in the river. Corpses were left to lie in the fields or thrown into holes. Only in a few cases burial was done. The news only came out two months later, although not in any Ethiopian media. The background of this massacre was that the Baale, who have been gold-mining for generations, had discovered new rich deposits in the Benna Korkora

46 Karsi, a village sitting on a low ridge towards Suri country, has been a past target of several raids that occurred after group clashes. For example, in May 1991, the village was also attacked after the Maji massacre mentioned in footnote 43 and after another Suri man was killed on the road by unknown assailants. That retaliatory raid on the village led to many Dizi being killed.

hills nearby. This came to be known by the government, who then wanted to give out a concession to a MIDROC subsidiary company⁴⁷ (i.e., to highlanders).

d) On 15 December 2012 there was another killing, again in Garsana, near a gold panning area, whereby 5 Suri men were killed by soldiers.

e) On 2 January 2013 other mass killings of Suri occurred in Nyologomala village, in the Baale area down from Dima town, when soldiers allegedly killed 64 Suri and Baale, including many girls.

These unprecedented massacres sent shockwaves through the Suri and Baale communities.

f) Another serious incident occurred on 15 January 2013, when government soldiers for no reason shot at Suri herd boys going to the Akobo River to water their animals.⁴⁸ Five of them were killed and the 200 cattle were driven to Dima town police station. Young cows and calves were left behind and later died of thirst in the field. When the Suri heard this, they were even more appalled - for them, to let young cows die just like that is a major crime. Only after more than a week the remaining cows were returned to the Suri, following an appeal from the Surma *woreda* administration to the President of the Southern Region (SNNPRS) in the capital Hawasa.

g) On 19 February 2014 a fight erupted between Dizi and Suri near the Koka plantation. Three people were killed, one seriously injured.

h) A more recent incident was the killing in June 2015 in broad daylight, of the former Surma *woreda* administrator Mesfin Debub, a Suri man who had voiced some criticism on the government plans in the Suri area and was arrested for this three years ago. Just six weeks after his sudden release in May 2015 he was gunned down in the streets of Kibish, the *woreda* capital. Some arrests were made, but not of the culprit. It seemed to have been a hired killing, ordered by people who feared Mesfin's knowledge of corruption and other scams in the local administration. Mesfin had earlier also drawn up a long list of violent incidents in the Maji area whereby Suri and others were victims, and had sent it to higher authorities. He also mentioned those shot in skirmishes with the government army and those killed at markets, at the gold-panning pits, and on the roads. It gave graphic details. It enumerated hundreds of Suri victims, many of them women and children.⁴⁹ Mesfin had also appealed to the Ethiopian High Court on the many cases of abuse against the Suri and on his own behalf, as a falsely accused man. The Court took more than a year to look into it. His release in April 2015 came unexpected after 2,5 years of imprisonment, without any reasons given (and not by High Court order). But six weeks later he was dead.

i) In May 2015, two weeks after the killing of Mesfin, five Suri militiamen in Kibish were killed; assailants unknown.

Not to be mentioned in detail here is the violence of a different order that goes back to an older dynamics of inter-ethnic group tensions, referred to above: the continuing cattle raids and killings between 'Bume' (= Nyangatom and Toposa) and Suri, with the latter now clearly on the losing side. Back in 2007 a truce had been achieved (see Sullivan 2008), even with the help of government and NGO representatives, which held a couple of years. But after 2011 the incidents were too many to speak of a truce anymore. In the past years, many hundreds of Suri cattle were raided by Nyangatom and Toposa, and dozens of Suri

47 MIDROC (abbreviation of the bizarre newspeak name 'Mohammed International Development Research and Organization Companies') is a huge conglomerate of companies led by Mohammed al-Amudi, a Saudi-Ethiopian businessman, with multiple billion-dollar business interests all over Ethiopia.

48 They took this long route because the waters of the Koka River were dried up and pasture was scarce.

49 It was a remarkably detailed list (in Amharic) covering more than 10 years. It makes painful reading.

herders as well as women and children were killed. Suri returned the raiding and attacking but were on the losing end. Below, a number of cases of killing seen in the last few years will be mentioned, revealing a pattern akin to a 'war of attrition', with the Nyangatom and Toposa dominant:

- A big raid occurred in August 2013 in the Washa plains near the Omo Park, where Toposa and Nyangatom stole ca. 3,000 cows from Suri, including the entire herd of the Chai-Suri chief (*komoru*) Barchagi Dollote. With him, many families were thrown into poverty. The ca. 80-90 raiders had timed their attack during a major stick-duelling event (*thagine*) among the Chai-Suri, for which most of the herders had left the livestock herds only under token protection. No police or army action was taken to track down the Nyangatom raiders; instead the authorities said that the Chai leaders should try and negotiate with the Nyangatom/Toposa themselves. As usual, government police and troops stayed away from the South Sudan border.

- On 27 January 2014 a Suri woman and a child were killed by Nyangatom, a day later followed by a raid on a Suri herding camp near Dima village.

- On 13 February 2014 Nyangatom/Toposa robbed dozens of Suri cattle near Dima again, and subsequently highlanders in the gold mining village of Garissa also attacked the Suri, taking cattle and stealing five rifles from herding boys. Three days later, ca. 50 cattle were returned to the Suri after mediation from the Surma *woreda* people.

- 25 March 2014: two Suri women and six children were killed by Toposa/Nyangatom in Lalameri. The killers escaped. No cattle or property was robbed; it appeared to be a targeted murder of Suri. Two days later, another eight Suri were killed near Lalameri.

- 3 April 2014: two Suri were shot and killed by Toposa near the village of Bero.

- May 2014: numerous stealth killings of Suri by Nyangatom/Toposa people near Korum and Kibish villages, targeting any Suri, including women and children. After one such incident on 10 May, whereby another Suri fell victim, his friends were able to warn the authorities in Kibish, and remarkably, the army sent out two cars with soldiers to help the Suri (a precedent). Several Nyangatom were killed and it appeared that one of them was a former student in the Kibish high school, who knew the town and its environs very well. He had been studying in Kibish under a scheme to forge peaceful links between Nyangatom and Suri. Clearly it had not worked.

- In late August 2015 there was a new disturbing development in that Nyangatom (not Toposa) west of the Omo near the place called Shi'ile, where a new state-supported plantation is being developed, attacked Chai-Suri in a night raid, killing sleeping Chai-Suri men, women and children with machetes and rifle fire, and robbed the Suri cattle. The killers allegedly said that because some Suri were employed as guardsmen at the plantation they had to be killed: the plantation was 'built on land taken away from the Nyangatom'. Here again, ethnic relations deteriorate due to due to predatory economic schemes and government misrule.

The toll of the violence measures up to other continental African cases, but none of was reported in the Ethiopian media, and neither in mainstream world press outlets. And in none of the cases except one there was a government effort to pursue the culprits. In no case order was restored or peace negotiated – it was only temporary containment, until the next 'incident'. Needless to say, the persistent violence and raiding have dire social, economic and psychological consequences for Suri society and for individual families.

While violent events are seemingly continuous, the year 2012 was a particularly disastrous one for the Suri. They started fearing for their future as a people, threatened in their

key livelihoods, and “hunted down”, as they expressed it, by the government and by neighbouring groups. Their situation was aggravated by the conflicts with the Dizi. In 2012-13 alone, at least 350 Suri were killed (also dozens of Dizi) and many others wounded or made invalid. Instead of the government playing a role of mediator between local population groups it appears that they often used the Dizi to fuel a politics of retaliation and did not protect against the raiding of Toposa (who are Sudanese) or Nyangatom. There had already been a bad relationship between Dizi and Suri for many years, which is well-documented.⁵⁰ The Dizi are a people hard hit by the highlander Ethiopian conquest since 1898 and strongly reduced in numbers and standards of living since then (cp. Haberland 1993), and are more dependent on the government. In the past few years it seemed that Dizi, who were favourable toward the Koka plantation (although it was largely on Suri land), were encouraged to take it out on Suri and ‘settle scores’; this time with army help. As hardly any of these deadly incidents was investigated and none of the culprits accused or punished, one can say that impunity still reigns.

This violence continued a pattern seen since at least twenty years: mutual attacks, raiding, road robbery, and occasional flare-up of murderous assaults in market towns like Maji against defenceless Suri not involved in any crime and traveling outside their own area. But there had been no all-out war, and no mass-slaughter like the one in Maji in February 2012 or in the Baale area in October 2012 (see above). The death toll was never as high as in 2012, when chaos prevailed. But in 2013, 2014 and early 2015, violent incidents continued, with dozens of people killed. Suri were often arbitrarily harassed (e.g., the Suri students in high schools in Mizan) and arrested on false grounds. Many were killed on the roads and in clashes, and thousands of their cattle were stolen.

In the Suri area an estimated 2000-strong contingent of police and Ethiopian army personnel was deployed in March 2014, complete with machine-gun mounted pick-up trucks, but not to protect the Suri. The army units arrived after it seemed that the Koka plantation was about to be closed down.⁵¹ As mentioned above, thirteen trucks with soldiers of the newly formed ‘Addis Kefteгна’ special forces came in from Hawasa (formerly Awasa, capital of the Southern Regional State). This was the third contingent of soldiers sent. A force of some 150-200 men had been installed 1996,⁵² which was augmented by new troops in November 2011. One of the aims of the 2011 force had been to urge local people to ‘clear the land’ and oversee the Suri of the Shinyameri, D’ebilecho and Tulgi-Tum areas to go into the new ‘resettlement villages’ around Kibish, the capital town of the Surma *woreda*. There the Suri had to occupy square tin-roofed houses, the superficial epitome of ‘modernity’ in rural Ethiopia. These were built since August 2012 by special teams, and were to be occupied by the Suri to replace their traditional wood and grass-roofed huts (which are of a much better construction). These tin-roof huts (in Amharic: ‘*qorqoro-béts*’) were unstable, of bad quality, and often built in unhealthier, low-lying areas near malaria-prone water sources instead of in high places that Suri prefer. The exercise so far has yielded some 250-300 ‘houses’ - ramshackle, windy and bad for the storage of harvested crops and seeds. Suri think they are useless and unfit to live in.⁵³ (See Fig. 5a and 5b) But the Suri in the purview of the administration were obliged to live in them, with PCDP workers even making the rounds to see if the new huts were occupied. As an incentive the Suri received – at least in the initial stages of the program in 2013 to early

50 E.g., in the work of the Dutch ethnologist J. Abbink since the mid-1990s. See also his 2012, 2013.

51 In May 2015 it was reported that the Koka plantation area was taken over by a few Tigrayan investors, with some Dizi as ‘frontmen’.

52 These were the ‘Rapid response force’, or *fet’no derash*; by 2014 replaced by the regular army units.

53 They say rats can easily get to the grain storage, which can no longer be in the top compartment, as was the case in the traditional huts. Thus the rats are no longer hindered by the fireplace’s smoke.

2014 – a bag of 25 kg. of maize per month.⁵⁴ This settlement program had all kinds of other coercive elements. The women were forced to cultivate onions around the new houses - while Suri do not use onions in their diet, and although they were promised a cash income from the sale of the onions, there was hardly a market, and they had to work for free on these plots. On the other hand, once in the new 'villages' the Suri are not allowed to make the necessary fields near them, which is seriously undermining their food provision. The areas around the new villages and around the town of Kibish also show alarming rates of deforestation and drying out.

The federal army troops, stationed near the former Tum and Tulgi airstrips and in Kibish town, by their presence also caused other trouble: having mostly nothing to do, they pester local people, sexually harass women, cause market conflicts over products, money, gold extortion, etc. After the new soldiers' contingent moved in, reports of rape also emerged. For instance, it was reported already on 12 December 2011 that ten Suri women and one highlander woman were raped.⁵⁵ Traditionally, rape was unknown among the Suri.

The local instability, generated by authoritarian governance, the imposed presence of government soldiers, police and highland immigrants, and plantation and oil exploration schemes, has created a new pattern of movement, if not *circular displacement*, of Suri with their cattle herds, living in a shrinking space. They move up and down *not* according to the seasons – the availability of water and pasture -, but in response to the security situation. The soldiers, police and highlander groups who want to take over their resources, are a permanent threat. For instance, in September 2012 the Suri moved their cattle from the central areas near Kibish, Sègilo and Merdur down to the southwest, to Mogosà (a plain with good pasture), and to Naita, T'ámudir, and Kutul Birino (three border mountains on the South Sudan border) - which had not occurred in many years, because it is risky: at Naita they run into competition with Nyangatom, at Kutul Birino with the powerful Toposa. In 2013 and early 2014 they similarly moved herds to these areas, not without losses due to raiding. Some Suri from the Sai and Kibish areas even moved as 'refugees' to Gura in the Bodi territory, east of the Omo River, although resented by local administrators, who threatened them.

Finally, the 'civilizational offensive', meaning a campaign to change so-called 'bad' socio-cultural behavior among the perceived backward Suri (and other locals), is also visible, and continues a narrative of denigration already developed in imperial times (cp. Ellison 2012). The government administration thus posits itself as a kind of moral authority over social and cultural matters. In this offensive, customs like, e.g., Suri ceremonial duelling, inserting lip and ear plate, putting red ochre in the hair, and 'walking naked' (as the authorities call it) are forbidden. The government also prohibited the local Suri Guide Association that was formed in recent years to receive tourists or to show visitors the ritual stick duelling contests. Tourism, although it has had its own problems in the past, is sacrificed on the altar of agrarian plantation development and resettlement. The familiar discourse on 'harmful traditional customs', developed under the *Derg* government, has made a full come-back. Posters were even seen on office buildings in Kibish town, depicting the so-called 'harmful culture' of the Suri. This shows that the entire development enterprise has a strong normative cultural – if not to say, colonizing - dimension, whereby a hegemonic system

⁵⁴ The Suri complained, however, that the maize provided was of very bad quality, having been in storage for ca. two years, and that it had a smell of chemicals on it. People did not use the maize for the porridge food (in Suri: *t'ila*), but converted it into the alcoholic *gèso* drink (in Amharic: *bordé*), sold in market places, thus inadvertently stimulating alcohol (ab)use. Ironically, with the proceeds the Suri women then bought good quality maize.

⁵⁵ Interview, November 2012, Addis Ababa.

imbued by superiority feelings is imposed on others. A process of gradual adaptation to new socio-economic conditions by Suri via their own cultural models is not allowed.

Part of the entire effort seems to be 'breaking local Suri resistance'. First, this resistance idea itself is 'constructed' by the authorities. Suri are not by nature opposed to the state but only want decent treatment, dialogue and 'good governance' regarding their land and livelihoods. However, their critical remarks and doubts on government measures implemented without discussion or even information given to them, are labelled as subversive and negative by government officials. They are thus cast as 'insurgents' when they claim a minimum of their civil rights. This is a policy driven by suspicion and paranoia, and shows that the authorities are insecure, and tend to always act in authoritarian fashion. They seem to view the use of force as the only real policy tool. Some local people noted that a 'politics of revenge' seems to be in place (cp. the statements by Mursi and Bodi people in the HRW report, 2012: 49-50).

As noted, the government has also tried to break up or destroy local subsistence systems, livelihoods, and local market relations, so that local people will go on the move or will be forced to come together in the new 'villages' with the tin-roofed huts, and be dependent on the government and on foreign 'food aid'.

One key element, mentioned before, is the active discouraging of transhumant cattle-herding by the government – it's even prohibited. In November 2012 I heard from Suri spokespersons from the Tum area, west of Maji, that the authorities told them during a meeting in Kibish town, held in July 2012: "You can only have five heads of cattle per family; the rest is to be sold or confiscated. And you have to settle down in these seven villages. And register all guns. No more moving around, and when you are in the villages, *do not cultivate*. If you have food problems, we'll give you food aid for a year. Then we'll teach you real farming on the plantations." They also said: "No more than two wives per man." No need to say that the Suri found all this preposterous and arrogant. After this meeting many Suri moved their herds to the west, to the Banka and Kutula-hola areas, closer to the Sudan border, and later also toward the areas of the Toposa in South Sudan, their long-standing enemies – even taking the risk of cattle raids from them, and which indeed came.

The government is also nudging the Suri out of their lands and into the resettlement sites by preventing them from cultivating or tending their fields. A first incident of this kind was on 29 April 2012, when they sent soldiers to the Suri fields near Tulgi and blocked the owners from entering. In addition, in several instances, arsonists - suspected to be plantation workers - burned down Suri houses, with money and grain stored in them. Much of this campaign is accompanied by constant insults of Suri by the soldiers and administrators and by threats 'to shoot the Suri to make them listen'.

There are also frequent arbitrary arrests of elders and young Suri as intimidation tactics. In May-June 2011 there was a first big raid of government soldiers and local militia on some Suri villages, 'in search of criminals', i.e. people who opposed the land alienation, the plantations, and the forced moving to designated villages. Dozens, including women and children, were put in Kibish prison. In July 2011 there was a Suri jail break from Kibish and Tulgi jails, on 2 November another one, when ten Suri men escaped but were shot during flight, with one dead and four badly injured (some died later). Four others were also caught and badly beaten up. They were transported to Mizan town, outside the Suri area, and got 30-year jail sentences. The policy of the authorities is to take Suri prisoners outside of the Suri area and let them linger in remote jails, where no family can bring them food or give other support. A very frequent complaint is that their arms are so tightly tied up that they

get paralyzed afterwards. Part of the army campaign is to disarm the Suri, trying to force them to give up their rifles. This would be a suicidal action for Suri, because in the absence of state military protection against neighboring groups or raiders (including the Sudanese Toposa) having no arms would make them very vulnerable to continued killings, herd loss and general decline. They also said they would lose any leverage against an abusive government.⁵⁶

Many Suri still get arrested randomly and are condemned to disproportionately long jail sentences, among the wives and relatives of young Suri men who are suspected of being against the resettlement plans and who fled from the town. Also several Suri passers-by were randomly arrested near the Koka plantation area or in Kibish town and thrown in to jail. Those arrested had their arms and legs often tied up so tightly that they lost the use of them. Furthermore, these arbitrary arrests hurt families and the local economy. Suri elders no longer cross the Kibish River to come to town and try to stay out of the reach of the authorities. In early 2015 there were about 35 Suri in jail, condemned in very questionable trials and given long prison sentences, from eight years to life. On average, the sentence was about 18 years: extravagant and in no relation to the charges or alleged 'crimes'. Most if not all were put away because of criticisms or questions, and probably to intimidate the Suri community into submission. Some Suri spokesmen in 2013 already sent a polite written appeal to the federal judicial authorities in Addis Ababa to ask why these people were in jail and why with such high sentences. No reply was received.

The Suri who are trained in modern vocations or otherwise educated, e.g., in Hawasa, Addis Ababa or elsewhere, are not hired for jobs in the emerging administration and services, except some as guards and policemen in Kibish. Students with a diploma or a BA or MA (although still very few) are mostly without a job and reverted to farming, gold-panning and herding. Many in frustration gave up any effort and decided to refuse work for any administrative service. This despite that some Suri were scheduled to be educated and put in place as ethnic community leaders, for the Surma *woreda*, in Hawasa and in the HPR (and forced to become EPRDF party members). Some of course may still be co-opted into fully supporting government policies. But all this does not produce a pliant community or cooperation on all fronts.

6. Responses

So how have the Suri responded to the imposed policies, the lack of consultation,⁵⁷ or the violent abuse they have experienced, and what are the effects so far on their society and culture? There was no immediate or massive violent reaction by Suri to these acts from the state. The responses below, including acts of protest and resistance, emerged after their repeated requests to be informed and consulted about the plans for their region and their future were ignored by the government and by any other authority:

a) selective resistance: their response to the establishment of the Koka plantation on their grazing lands in 2011 was to try and continue to use the land and let their cattle forage, e.g., on the maize grown there. As they were not aware of a contract being signed and in the absence of information submitted to Suri spokesmen, they went on as if the land

⁵⁶ Similar disarmament campaigns, which the Suri know of, were directed against the Me'en people, eastern neighbours of the Dizi and Suri. Here the state military forces already wreaked havoc in the years 2010-2014, with nightly raids and crude violence. There were cases where the soldiers simply shot and killed Me'en walking with a rifle – in some instances just in front of their children.

⁵⁷ In contrast to policies nominally announced but not practiced; compare Yidnekachew 2015.

was theirs. This resulted in disputes and armed skirmishes, and people killed on both sides. As noted, Suri were also very dismayed about the wholesale destruction of all local vegetation in and around the plantation area, including the many useful shrubs and tree species.

b) partial 'resettlement': in areas close to Kibish town some Suri have built new tin-roof houses in the 'new villages' and at least temporarily live there: especially impoverished people and widows or divorcees with children and little means. Some Suri Christian converts also settled there.

c) continuity: others try to stay put in remaining pasture lands, or move away, more towards the Sudan border region, but into precarious areas vulnerable to raiding and water and pasture scarcity

d) herding practices disturbed: Suri herding units (or *b'uran*, a cooperative unit of many herd owners) increasingly tend to break up; solidarity is under stress.

e) cultural defence: culturally important events, like ritual duelling, life-cycle rituals and initiations, are held away from the authorities, in more secluded spaces.

f) social pressure: family organization and children's health and education are adversely affected, with household fragmentation and less support from the wider clan network

g) educational turmoil: school attendance of Suri kids is interrupted and has decreased in many schools. One reason was that many school buildings in and around Kibish were used as barracks by the newly arrived army troops since 2012. By early 2014, 15 of the 23 primary schools in the *woreda* were closed.

h) livelihood threats: traditional Suri agrarian cultivation is more unstable due to pressure and forced mobility, and leads to scarcity.

i) destructive impact of violence: the state-condoned violence has made several hundred victims and many wounded and bereaved, and this has a demoralizing and traumatic effect on lives and social relations.

j) psychological distress: growing anger and despair about the future, about immediate concerns of food procurement, property, where to settle, family life, and their own identity and survival are all bothering people. At times the accumulating anger prevents people even from eating or sleeping normally. Combined with the ongoing government interference and repression of their collective rituals and cultural ceremonies, their quality of life has notably gone down.

k) restraint and protest: after the big massacres of Suri over the past few years, the Suri have *not* violently retaliated in any big way. They waited to get justice from the authorities. It did not come. Meanwhile, the number of young Suri men that resorted to highway robbery, attacking cars and travellers to rob property, has however significantly increased. This is locally known as the *shifita* (= bandit) problem. Some of the perpetrators are former students who were educated but could not get jobs in the local administration; others are the victims of robbery, violence and dispossession themselves. For the authorities, all signs of disagreement and criticism on state socio-economic plans is 'rebellion', to be quelled. All this led to heightened insecurity and arbitrary punishments of other Suri by the authorities. In 2013 and 2014 the *shifita* problem was most acute and also led to the accidental and near-fatal shooting on 3 October 2014 of a missionary couple (the Haspels),⁵⁸ who had worked in very good relations with the Suri for decades.

58 See: www.geeskaafrika.com/ethiopia-american-missionary-couple-attacked-in-ethiopia-by-rebels/5845/ (accessed 28 November 2015).

7. Superfluous people?

We see that in the great developmental venture in the Southwest there are major problems of governance, not to say of a lack of political ethics:

- no citizenship rights are politically and culturally accorded to Suri and other local indigenous peoples. Any form of civic representation of local interests, e.g. via their own spokespersons or grass-roots NGOs, is absent – these were not allowed. Claims to land and other procedures are not negotiated or even discussed; land is simply appropriated, and only pittance compensations are paid. Here and on many other issues of policy, the role of *local* governments should be taken into account. Many of the Zonal and district administrations are ill-trained, incompetent and negligent or indifferent about rights of local people. In this respect at least, the ‘autonomy’ of lower-level governmental layers is indeed realized, but in a negative sense. It may be that the regional and federal governments are not fully aware of the mistakes, corruption and gross abuse that exist on the lower levels, but they hardly take corrective action.

- the Suri economy – which is outside the plantation economy and weakly connected to markets - is negated by the authorities as being unproductive or even as ‘non-existing’ – it’s not part of the GDP-narrative. Their livelihoods are denigrated.

- donor countries mostly concur with the government and deny any responsibility for abuse or ‘mistakes’, although they funded the PCDP, the alleged MDG schemes, etc. Often funds also disappear on the local level, because no proper auditing of the aid is done, let alone of its possible impact on insecurity in the area. There is in fact endemic corruption. The PCDP is a great source of local government or personal revenue, but it’s hardly productive or beneficial. Its officers have a bad reputation.

- Suri options are shrinking: a) they may become impoverished laborers/ guardsmen on the new agrarian plantations (cp. the scenario of many Maasai in Kenya); b) they will move to Sudan and become subservient to more powerful peoples there, e.g. the Toposa, or go to Boma or Murle country in Sudan, or c) they will make the best of it and try to survive in the middle of problems, being on the move constantly, and fight to defend their way of life and suffer major casualties.

Based on past experiences and abuse, Suri have little confidence in the government, which in their eyes - and in those of the other indigenous peoples - has betrayed its mandate. The Suri and neighboring groups are also internally weak and divided, having no united front. Their resistance is small-scale, not strategic. The Suri move away, if they can, to other pastures and settlement sites, but this carries danger. Neither do they have *alliances* as yet with other people, perhaps only a bit of contact and exchange of views with the Me'en on the Regional (Hawasa) level, and among Parliament (HPR) members in Addis Ababa, but they are very few (2 Me'en, 1 Suri, 1 Baale, 1 or 2 Dizi) and say they have little impact. The government also seemingly discourages cooperation. With the Anywa or Nyangatom or Dizi representatives there have been occasional meetings, e.g., after the 2007 ‘peace deal’ in Kangaten (cp. Sullivan 2008), but there is no good contact (they are more or less enemies, often suspicious). There are some (anonymized) Facebook group discussion lists, but the information given there is fragmentary, can sometimes not be double-checked, and reaches only a very small audience, virtually all outside of Ethiopia. A Suri political leader (one of the few with some access to the regional government level) said to me in 2014: “I am no longer listened to on the federal government level or even on the local level; I am over-ruled. No help, no concern for us and our big problems. They deny us any rights, and there is no law. I thought we were Ethiopian citizens? That I am an EPRDF party

member makes no difference. But clearly the Suri don't like and will never like their land being taken away; they do not like to be abused and pushed into those villages. And they are not prepared to abandon cattle herding and to be made poor."⁵⁹

In the final instance, the local population is seen by the government and many investors as a hindrance and a nuisance, not as a 'resource', or a partner/stakeholder, i.e., as *citizens* of the state. Under no regime in Ethiopia has the position of the indigenous ethnic minority people deteriorated so much. In the past years there was unprecedented insecurity. The pattern of tensions between both local ethnic groups among themselves as well as with the authorities has intensified. The political model of nominal ethnic self-empowerment of the EPRDF has had no noticeable impact on improving the situation in this area.

Every step of the policy seen so far is geared to bypassing, denigrating and belittling the local population, who are side-lined and get the message of being useless, without resources or knowledge, and expendable. Thus, they are not considered a legitimate party in any kind of conversation about the area in which they live. Legally they do not own the land - as we know, the government has made sure that all land is state land, even in the cities nowadays, so no one has any leg to stand on. All in all, Suri cannot communicate their concerns; there is no public discourse by or on Suri permitted by the government. Their story is similar to that recorded among people in the Gambela area (and indeed in more regions of South and West Ethiopia (cp. the Oakland Institute report, 2015)).⁶⁰ The government also actively works against the formation of trans-group alliances. For instance, the Nyangatom-Suri relationship was adversely affected by the faulty politics of development (see Davison 2013): the state Ethiopian Sugar Corporation and MeTEC in 2015 started construction of a plantation in the south in the Nyangatom-Suri borderlands, whereby Nyangatom are forced out and urged to go into new resettlement villages. In response, some Nyangatom groups move to South Sudan with their herds, closer to their Toposa allies. But others stay and keep attacking their neighbours. Thus, the developmental enterprise as implemented in Southwest Ethiopia generates injustice, resistance and violence by local people due to their being humiliated, bypassed, persecuted, and chased away, increasing the general misery of the region.

8. Concluding

This paper is a step towards a socio-political history of 'development' in agro-pastoralist areas of contemporary Southern Ethiopia. The record of the state's expansion and intrusive political-economic presence as relating to local indigenous people rehearses the trajectory seen in similar conditions in many other developing countries. It reads as a catalogue of missed chances, misrule, and indeed of massive 'land grab' – the correct word if land is taken against the wishes of the local cultivators' rights and without discussion or adequate legal compensation.⁶¹ In the Southern Ethiopian context, the dramatic impact of this on local ethnic groups and their time-tested life-ways is particularly acute. In terms of the theme of social history, the record of these people struggling to survive and keeping dignity is to be preserved and be made known.

It is clear that the developmental dispensation in Southwest Ethiopia is not 'inclusive', to

⁵⁹ Interview, December 2014.

⁶⁰ See for instance the 'Open Letter' of 31 January 2015 by Anuak (Anywa) refugees to World Bank President Jim Yong Kim, at: www.inclusivedevelopment.net/open-letter-from-anuak-ethiopian-refugees-to-the-president-of-the-world-bank-jim-yong-kim/.

⁶¹ Compare L. Cotula's EU report (2014).

put it mildly. Indeed the government does hardly seem to *care* whether it is or not. The entire effort in Southern Ethiopia has been producing human misery of major proportions, with government callousness, incompetence and rampant criminality as well as pervasive human rights abuse. But no government officials or police and army personnel were prosecuted or condemned for their deeds.

Here lies the first issue for reform. There is a need to identify the abuses and crimes committed against the local people (many events and actions count as such under the clauses of the Ethiopian Constitution), unlawful killing and imprisonment, corruption, graft and abuse of power, including those of the state, of which this paper has presented a record. Culprits, now shielded by a system of impunity, are of course to be prosecuted. Second, donor countries and the World Bank in their projects should desist from complicity and start monitoring and revising the projects they support. Denial⁶² does not help. Ethiopia is not the 'model' for development, as superficially and opportunistically touted by Western and other donor countries. Third, a rethinking of the whole concept of 'development' is necessary - in a multidimensional way: economic, social, environmental, moral. Scientific evidence is mounting that the way development is now globally pursued - based on models of 'we-they' thinking and imposition - generates conflict, inequality, and ecological disaster. We see it well-demonstrated in the Ethiopian Southwest.

The problems of developmental expansion are not unique for Ethiopia, because in most countries 'development' is a win-lose process (see Ashkenazi 2012). But no arguments or popular protests or local interests against this top-down blueprint implementation are entertained, as we can see in the case study described in this paper. The antagonistic model implemented is only geared to (ill-prepared and authoritarian) techno-agrarian development of the area, and not to wider human development. This political process misrepresents the non-formal, real economy on the ground. It denies its potential and continuity, ignores the rights-based aspects of development relevant to local inhabitants already present, *and* subverts longer-term environmental sustainability. This last element, the problems that will be seen in the environmental-ecological management of the plantation areas and their surroundings, the decline of the value of resources and the problems of soil exhaustion, emerging local water scarcity and decline of riverine cultivation due to the Gibe-3 dam, etc. will be more serious *in an economic sense*, although they will be manifested in 10 to 15 years' time, when it may too late to remedy.⁶³ The notable example of how earlier large-scale plantation development in the Afar region has failed comes to mind.⁶⁴ In addition, the familiar cycle of relative over-population and over-use of the soil, as well-known from the north and centre of Ethiopia, will likely be repeated in the South.

The old-fashioned, neo-modernist version of development that seems to be in place is buttressed by surprising authoritarianism, repression, and often by state disdain toward critical scientific research insights and policy advice. In much of the developmental enterprise in Ethiopia there is of course neither awareness of 'CSR' thinking nor of international codes of conduct on investment, resource use and consultation processes. These are also elements in principle supported, if not required, by donor-country programs, but not visible in the latter's implementation or monitoring. However, as Turton (2012: 2),

62 See: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/05/world-bank-resettlement_n_6810208.html. Also Oakland Institute 2013b; Chavkin 2015.

63 See J. Hendry's new study (2014) on the pressing need in today's world to take into account indigenous ways of dealing with the environment.

64 One of the most convincing studies of this is Behnke and Kerven 2013. See also an MPI working paper (Abbink, Askew, *et al.* 2014) on the economic benefits of pastoralism, and Shanahan 2013.

Sen (2009: 373) and others have said, there are moral aspects involved in development processes and policies, and these must be made explicit, taking into account the local discourses and practices of the people affected.

There is room for a major revision of policy. We join various Ethiopian scholars in calling on policy makers in Ethiopia to leave the primacy of political 'ideology', show responsibility, and to develop a pragmatic, rights-based view on development which can be supported by rural people in Ethiopia, including the agro-pastoralists in the Southwest. As Muhammad Abdulahi already noted in 2007 (in a paper on the status of pastoral land rights in Ethiopia): "Pastoralists in Ethiopia want property rights that match their activities: access rights, rules that prevent encroachment upon their communal grazing lands as well as rules that prevent over-use of their resources." (Mohammad 2007: 125). None of these rights have been realized, and the GTP-related activities since 2010, as referred to in this paper, make them a very distant possibility, if not an illusion. The subversion of economic, civic and human rights of the pastoralist peoples is secondary to all but the pastoralists themselves, and a testimony to the great problems and personal drama that they are facing. Coercion is the name of the game, and state rule as manifested on the regional and local level in the areas discussed seems more like a big racket, marked by incompetence and imposition. Markakis said in his recent major work (2011: 355): the "structural fault" of the current Ethiopian state-building design is "... the centre's monopoly of power". This is putting it mildly. The facts show that 'ethnic-based federalism', allegedly intended to seek local solutions for local problems, is so far based on an illusion and generates conflict on the local level. Earlier promises, including by the former Prime Minister in the late 1990s (Markakis 2011: 279-80), about the 'respect for diversity', etc. have proved to be vacuous, and perhaps the time has come for the current government to return to such earlier visions and give them new institutional form. In addition, if Ethiopia is serious about '...implementing the Kaizen philosophy',⁶⁵ as the draft-GTP II Plan announces (National Planning Commission 2015: 10) then it should also be done in the rural areas.

In a major study of the legal issues around land use in Ethiopia, legal scholar Elias N. Stebek in 2011 already called for a rethinking of the policies and practices of land acquisition and investments in Ethiopia, and concluded: "The conceptions of economic 'growth' that misinform policies and decisions (such as the current wave of massive land transfers to foreign 'investors') may continue until inevitable lessons are learnt the hard way." (Stebek 2011: 214). One cannot but agree. Specifically the human costs in the Maji area have already been too high. Better planning, normal governance and democratic procedures could have prevented them. The Suri, like the Me'en, the Anywa, the Mursi, the Bodi, the Kwegu and others, are still waiting for serious 'mitigation measures' and for the opportunity to make some choices for the future by themselves.

Better still would be to engage them as *partners* in a joint, multi-path development venture in the Omo Valley area, with agro-pastoralism tolerated and supported by inputs from the government and in symbiosis with the new agrarian enterprises. The government should facilitate, not subvert, the agro-pastoralists' ways of life and allow them their own adaptive choices and investments, etc. on the basis of their current activities, settlement patterns and mobility (cp. also CDE 2015). The local livelihoods systems, while technologically simple and not marked by consumerism or material wealth (only cattle wealth), are not by definition inferior, 'backward' or food-insecure. Basic is to allow the people choice and initiative. Whether they then will adapt to more sedentary ways of life or even wage labor

⁶⁵ The Japanese managerial philosophy of continuous, gradual improvement and learning from mistakes. Some of its elements, next to the productivity-increasing ones, were 'humanizing the work place' and 'encouraging participation'.

jobs in enterprises that will come to the area, or to the cultural models held as superior by highlander-Ethiopians, is not for the government to impose, and certainly not in a disdainful hegemonic way. Political, social and economic coercion or abuse toward the Suri and other local peoples have no legal and rightful basis. Advisable is to see Suri – and the other agro-pastoral groups in the area - as agents of their own social history and recognize them as the long-time inhabitants and inheritors of these lands, in which they always had, and will continue to have, a major stake.

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APPENDIX: FIGURES

Figure 1. Map of Ethiopia and its regional states (The area under discussion in this paper is along the Omo River north of 'Omorate', in the Southwest)



(Source: <http://previews.123rf.com/images/lesniewski/lesniewski1411/lesniewski141100103/33620197-ethiopia-administrative-map-Stock-Vector.jpg>)

Figure 2. Southwest Ethiopia and principal ethnic groups

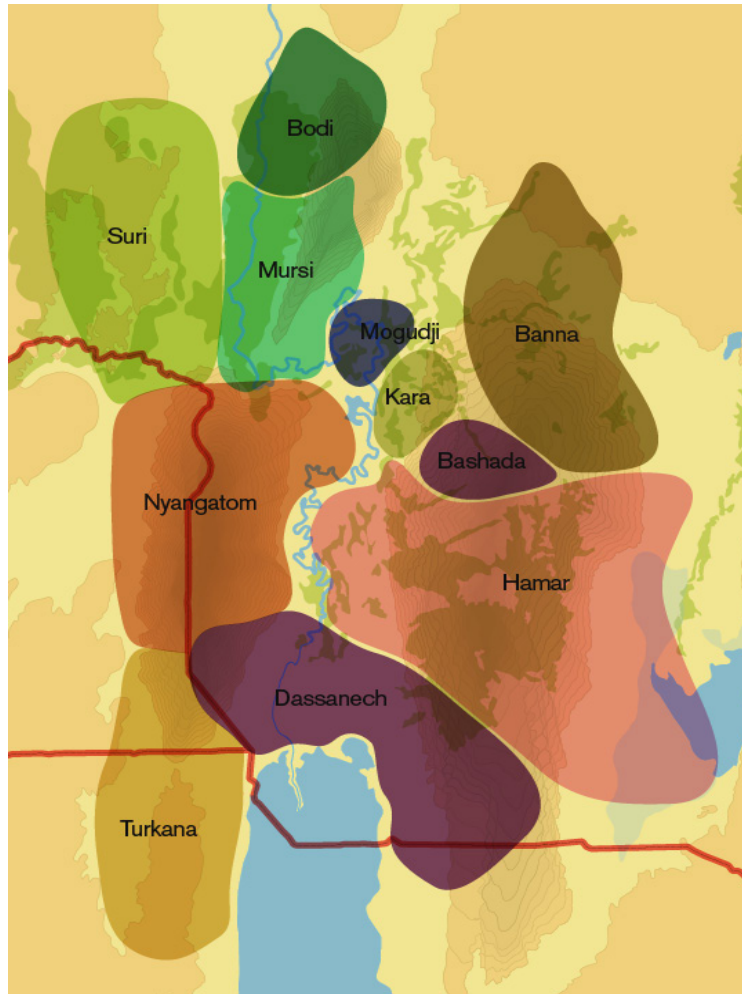
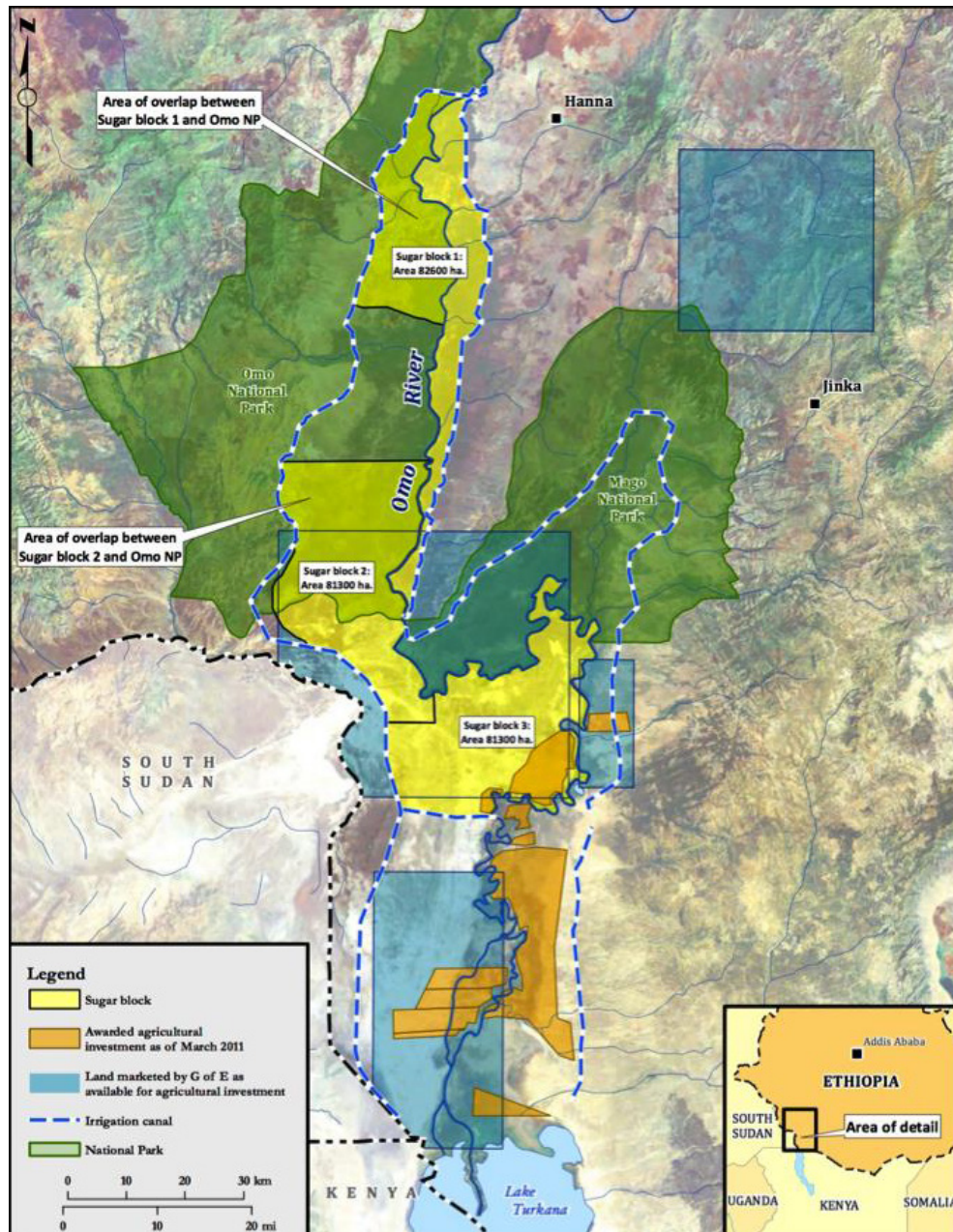


Figure 3. Planned state agricultural development in the Lower Omo region, 2012



(Source: S. Avery 2012, vol. 1, p. 59). In yellow are the sugar cane plantations, on Suri and Nyangatom land as well as Omo National Park surface)

Figure 4. Suri herders with cattle



(Source: <http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.nl/2013/02/the-suri-or-shuri-are-pastoral-that.html>)

Figure 5a. A new tin-roofed 'house' (2014)



Figure 5b. The new house type from the inside

