

Resettlement, Food Security and the Problem of Forest Resource Depletion in Western Ethiopia: The Case of Angar Gutin Resettlement Site in Eastern Wollega

By Zelalem Teferra¹

Abstract

This article is concerned with the ecological impacts of state-sponsored and self-initiated resettlements in western Ethiopia. Based on assessment of empirical data obtained from three contiguous districts of Eastern Wollega, namely, Gidda-Kiramu, Abe-Dongoro and Limu districts, the research inquires into the sustainability of the widely held notion among the policy makers of Ethiopia that resettlement as a food security strategy is viable and there is still abundant unsettled land in western Ethiopia to carryout further resettlement schemes.

Most of the large-scale population resettlements in Ethiopia, be they state sponsored or self- initiated, were virtually carried out under the guise of food security. Their long-term results, however, are negative and dismal in many instances. The finding of the current research work in Angar-Gutin Resettlement Site is a testimony to this. It indicated that massive resettlements in the ecologically fragile lowland areas are effective only as a short-term mechanism of defusing acute economic problems. In the long-run, they tend to cause much more environmental stress than ensuring food security and environmental well-being. Particularly, in the absence of a clearly set natural resource management system, in the absence of viable mechanisms for regulating settlement patterns of migrant population (especially spontaneous migrants), and in the absence of formally recognized entitlement rights to the land (albeit the current attempt to certify usufruct right), both state-sponsored and self-initiated resettlements were bound to be environmentally unsound. They led to wanton destruction of forest resources and the subsequent deterioration of the regional biodiversity.

¹ The Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University.

Introduction

Drought as a recurring natural phenomenon inflicts colossal damage on human life, the economy as well as the ecology of contemporary Ethiopia. It affects this country so frequently that sometimes people enter into an ensuing round of drought cycle while not recovering from the earlier.

During the 1970s and 80s, the most drought stricken areas were limited to northern Ethiopia, especially Wallo and Tigray. Recently, however, the geographic scope of the drought has considerably been bloated covering a wide range of areas in the country, including those which have hitherto been considered the most fertile and productive zones. Zones such as East Hararghe in Oromia Regional State were among the recently affected areas. The recent calamities have put them in the ranks of drought vulnerable areas.

In response to recent drought and the subsequent food shortage, the Ethiopian government in 2003 designed a new plan called *Voluntary Resettlement Program (Access to Improved Land)*. According to Feleke Tadele (2003:9), the main objective of this program is to enable upto 440,000 chronically food-insecure households or 2.2 million people attain food security through improved access to land and voluntary resettlement. This is virtually a renewal of state-sponsored massive resettlement venture in the so called unused lands. Yet, this program invokes many more questions than readily available answers. The questions that come to mind are: Have we made impact assessment of the past resettlement ventures so that we can justify our present actions? Do we really have abundant unused lands that could readily be used to resettle a large number of people and ensure environmental sustainability? By encouraging large-scale resettlement every time the country is hit by drought, don't we risk depleting our meager forest resources?

This paper attempts to shade light on some of these questions based on the assessment of the empirical data obtained from one of the Derg–time conventional resettlement sites in Eastern Wollega,

namely *Angar Gutin*, and the adjacent territories. It is structured as follows. The first part provides an overview of the study area; the second part deals with the sequences of population resettlement in the area; the third part is devoted to the assessment of the environmental impacts of these resettlements with special emphasis on depletion of forest resources, and finally, the last one is a concluding remark pointing to policy implications.

Research Methods and Data Source.

It should be noted that this study is largely based on primary data gathered through successive field works (mainly in *Gidda-Kiramu* district), which involved interviews and participant observations. Besides, extensive review of literature relating to planned and spontaneous resettlements in Ethiopia has been conducted.

Overview of Angar-Gutin and its Environs.

Angar Gutin resettlement site is located in Gida Kiremu District of Eastern Wollega, Oromia Regional State. Located north of the River Angar and extending up to the southern foots of the Ditcho escarpment ($36^{\circ} 27' - 36^{\circ} 49'$ East and $9^{\circ} 19' - 9^{\circ} 38'$ North), *Gutin* occupies an extensive stretch of land, which is conducive for modern large-scale agriculture. Except some hills rising here and there in the middle of a gentle slope, the area is predominantly a plain land covered by tropical woods, savanna grasses, bamboo, shrubs, small trees and forests along the river banks.

It has very good moisture with an average rainfall upto 1953 mm and a hot climate with a maximum temperature of 39^oc. While small rivers like *Andode* and many others drain its northern and central parts, its southern extremities are watered by *Angar River*, a tributary of Blue Nile. Its brownish soil with sandy clay and loamy lastisols has a high agriculture potential. Nonetheless, the presence of high slops in some areas makes it susceptible to erosion (Allula, 1986). Hills like *Injirro*, *Tulu- Gana*, *Arkumbe* and *Gutin* add a remarkable panorama to the gentle slope extending westwards from *Abe-Dorngoro* district to *Limu* crossing *Gida- kiremu*.

In spite of its hotness during the winter season, due to its forest coverage and the drainage patterns just mentioned, *Gutin* enjoys enough moisture to grow varieties of crops and fruits. Moreover, originally it was teemed with varieties of wildlife in search of which the Oromo hunters inhabiting *Gidda-Kiremu* and *Limu* districts used to descend down the *Ditcho* escarpment to kill big animals such as lions and buffalos mainly to demonstrate their courage and vigor over the centuries. Besides the big wild animals, there were other varieties worth mentioning here. These are wild boars or hogs (*karkarro*), wild pigs, varieties of birds and different species of gazelle and antelope. Most ubiquitous, of course, were the armies of baboons one could easily watch by the roadside on the way to *Gida* or *Nekemte*. These are generally few of the wildlife varieties in *Angar Gutin* areas, which once endowed this beautiful land.

Inception of Angar-Gutin Agricultural Development Project.

Despite its fertility and the presence of diverse wildlife mentioned above, the area lying along the Angar valley was not permanently settled for much of its history. This has to do with high malaria infestation and rampancy of animal diseases,

especially *trypanosomiasis*. This situation coupled with the absence of modern medicine and lack of appropriate know-how to combat the problems has discouraged settlement on a large-scale except by few hunters and shifting cultivators, i.e., the Gumuz communities.² Instead, the area was largely seen as a hunting ground by Oromo communities inhabiting the adjacent highland areas, and as a trade route leading from Gidda-Ayana to Leqa-Nekemte and vice versa.

The above situation started to change during the second half of the 20th century. In the 1970, being motivated by the presence of agriculturally conducive climate, appropriate soil type and equipped with modern technology to combat malaria and animal diseases, three Dutch citizens established an agricultural development project known as '*Solidarite et Development*' in the vicinity of a town currently known as 'Gutin' (Allula, 1986).

The main pursuit of the founders of the project was promotion of development in the area by introducing labor-intensive intermediate agricultural technology. According to a local informant,³ three men from the Netherlands (actually brothers), led by Abraham Ibor (the elder one) established the *Angar Gutin* Agricultural project just at the southern foot of the *Injrro* hill. Immediately after establishing an agricultural project, the Dutch resettled some landless peasants from Gojjam, Shewa and Wollega in the area.⁴ Later, they started to recruit daily laborers from among the Oromo communities inhabiting adjacent

² According to Alula (1986) prior to the arrival of the highlanders, the area was sparsely populated (less than 10 person per square kilometer by Nilotes (Kaza)) who still inhabit the riverine areas.

³ Interview with Abebe Gemedo, a resident of Gutin town and former employee of the Dutch brothers.

⁴ Data about the early settlers from Gojjam and Shewa is very much limited and could not be elaborated here. Nonetheless, Alula (1986:10) suggested that 96% of the early settlers were drawn from Wellega both from higher altitudes and low-lying areas.

territories. Local people confirm that the Dutch established a number of agro-experimental centers where agricultural researches were conducted on various crops such as maize, sorghum, sesame and varieties of legumes including soy and haricot beans.

Fruits such as banana, lemon, orange and mango were also introduced. According to these informants,⁵ there were agricultural research and experimental centers radiating in all directions from the Dutch residence at *Gutin*. Being designated by numbers, these centers were linked to *Gutin* by feeder dry-weather roads. In each center there were about 30 employees who were supposed to work on temporary basis.⁶

In order to increase agricultural productivity, the Dutch introduced simple but effective farming technologies.⁷ This included a new way of cultivation using a single ox instead of pair. The tilling equipment, especially the ploughshares, were said to have been improved substantially. Though very much limited in application, improved 'turn wrest' ox ploughs with *brabant* head yokes, doubling the pulling force were also introduced. Furthermore, the Dutch introduced a modern system of dairy farming and animal hybridization.⁸

Undoubtedly, the introduction of these inputs by far improved labor productivity and increased crop yield. Nevertheless, being

⁵ Interview with Abebe Gameda and Dorsis Duguma, April 2003, Gutin.

⁶ Each worker was said to have earned 1.90 Birr a day and about 45 Birr a month.

⁷ They conducted researches on varieties of crops so as to improve their productivity and increase yields. They also selected and disseminated seed varieties, which are resistant to various crop diseases and possess high adaptive capacity to the local environment.

⁸ Other policies included erosion control through terracing, contour ploughing and trypanosomiasis control through clearing the Tsetse fly habitation and veterinary and entomological measures (See Alula 1986:9).

criticized on various grounds, particularly due to high costs for small-scale projects, this scheme was denied further operation. Citing Simpson, Alula (1986) noted that the Dutch settlement strategy was elaborate and its pace too slow in view of the urgent needs of the country. On the basis of the above allegations, the Derg government annulled their contract in 1977.

Angar-Gutin as a Resettlement Project.

The Dutch abandoned the area in 1977 following the termination of the 7-year contract. Soon after their evacuation, their properties were brought under the control of the *Settlement Authority* (hereafter SA).⁹

During the same period, in pursuit of rehabilitating the drought affected and landless peasants drawn from various parts of the country, this organization introduced a mechanized system of farming and started to restructure the local settlement pattern. Scattered individual holdings were reorganized into compact villages with the intent to creating experimental cooperative farms.

Initially, two villages which were previously designated by the Dutch as agricultural research units were selected for launching the new program. In these villages, the former Dutch employees who wished to stay were resettled together with the *Walloyes*¹⁰ who spontaneously migrated and settled in the vicinity of *Angar-Gutin* before the Derg era, especially in *Tulu Gana* areas of *Abe-Dongoro* District.¹¹

⁹ Until the Settlement Authority (SA) was established in 1976 as an autonomous agency within the Ministry of Agriculture, settlement planning was the responsibility of the Inter-ministerial Group on Land Settlement, and RRC was the chief implementing agency (see Dessalegn Rahmato 2003:17).

¹⁰ 'Walloye' are settler communities whose origin is the former Wallo province of Ethiopia. Despite their collective label and linguistic homogeneity, ethnically they exhibit significant difference. Some of them belong to Semitic speaking Amhara ethnic group while others belong to a Cushitic speaking Oromo ethnicity.

¹¹ According to local informants, initially, they settled in *Abe-Dongoro* district by the consent of the then prominent *balabat* (landlord), *Fitawrari Aberra Wirtu*. He was said to have allowed 300

According to an informant,¹² the SA carried out the above activities until September 1979. Later, the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (R.R.C.) replaced it as the sole organization that dealt with disaster-induced problems in

Ethiopia. In the same year, the RRC resettled newcomers allegedly brought from the drought affected areas of northern Ethiopia, mainly from Tigray and Wallo, but majority of which constituted men of Tigrayan origin. The *Walloye* newcomers joined their kinsmen formerly resettled in the first and the second resettlement villages, locally dubbed ‘*hudad*’ one and ‘*hudad*’ two respectively¹³. This raised the number of people in the two villages up to 1000 inhabitants, i.e., 500 in each village.¹⁴

The 1,800 Tigrayan newcomers were resettled in three distinct villages officially designated village number 3, 4, and 5 respectively (see the number of settlers in the old and integrated sites in the table below).

Table 1: Population figures by head, household, sex and type of settlement.

Settlements	Heads			Family			Total		
	Male	Feml	Total	Male	Fml	Total	Male	Feml	Total
Old	101083	75	1156	1224	2062	3286	2237	2135	4442
Integrated	96961	18185	1146	1352	1566	2918	2313	1751	4064
Total	202044	26260	2302	2576	3628	6204	4540	3886	8506

Source: Alula Pankurst 1986. Annex.

Walloye households to settle at a place called ‘*Yanto*’ in the form of *gabbar* (tenants). This marked the first contact between the lowland Oromo communities and the northern settlers in the vicinity of *Angar Gutin*.

¹² Interview: Ato Kaba Jabessa, April 2003, Gutin.

¹³ The term *Hudad* refers to a farm land in local language- Oromiffa.

¹⁴ According to Alula (1986), the establishment of a 500 people resettlement village is a standard introduced by the RRC in Agar Gutin.

The overwhelming majority of informants who came from Wallo confirmed that they voluntarily accepted the government offer for resettlement. When asked to mention the reason for their decisions for relocation, they stated that, apart from the recurring drought in their home land, there were several push factors that forced people to abandon their native birth places. These are: scarcity of farm plots, land degradation and over cultivation.

The case of the Tigrayan population according to informants was totally different. One of the Tigrayan elder informants, who preferred anonymity, informed the researcher that in 1979, the Derg initiated the resettlement to deliberately uproot the Tigrayans. He noted that there was neither drought nor land scarcity to justify the relocation. According to Kassahun Berhanu (2003), the resettlement of the Tigrayan population was apparently stimulated by political motives of the military regime than disaster problems or economic rationales.

It was aimed at containing insurgent activities (especially of the TPLF) in the area as they obtained all sorts of support in their original places of domicile in the course of their struggle against the military regime. The second group of the Tigrayan settlers arrived in Gutin in the wake of 1984/85 drought. Unlike the former settlers, whose adaptation period was prolonged due to various factors, these newcomers were said to have been easily adapted to the local setting as they found there pioneer compatriots. Only few of them have abandoned the area following the fall of the Derg.

Currently, most of the Tigrayans living in *Gutin* and its environs are satisfied with their lives and do not want to return back to Tigray. When asked why they did not abandon the area after the demise of the military regime, most of the respondents answered that they have already adapted themselves to the local social and environmental settings and managed to produce surplus to sustain life. They have managed to earn private property by

engaging themselves in agricultural production, grain trade and other private businesses.¹⁵

Angar-Gutin between 1984 and 1991.

This period was marked by intensification of the resettlement activity in response to the devastating drought of 1984/85. Following that blowing disaster, the newly established Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) took the entire activity of resettlement under its control. It formulated an action plan, which included short-term emergency relief measures and long-term enduring programs with a massive resettlement of population from the drought affected areas of the north into the so called more conducive regions of the southwest and western provinces. The party took upon itself the entire commanding measures of the project. According to Alula (1986: 2), the party provided organizational leadership, personnel and determination. The majority of the 1984/85 national resettlement programs were implemented in the southwest in general and Wollega in particular. Of this, the share of *Angar Gutin's conventional resettlement* area was immense as the table below shows.

Table 2. Large-scale Resettlements of the 1980s.

	Resettlement site	Household Size	Family members	Amount of land Allotted (ha)
Wollega	Assosa	14,143	47,079	18,808
	Keto	10,393	37,024	11,234
	Angar Gutin	9,756	29,217	12,329
	Jarso	3,860	15,512	4,644
Gambella		11,234	44, 664	15,600
Total		49,390	173, 512	62,615

Source: Alemneh Dejene (1990(b):178)

¹⁵ I personally met a number of successful Tigrayan businessmen in *Gutin* town who made their fortune through agricultural production, hotel business and grain trade.

As could be seen from the table, the magnitude of this resettlement was by far huge and constituted an unprecedented massive population relocation ever conducted in the history of the country until the 1980s. Given the sheer size of the scheme, the government deployed all the ministries and its political cadres to take part in the execution of resettlement programs.

During the period from 1979-1991 of the estimated 56,000 ha of arable land available in *Angar-Gutin* and its environs, about 12,500 ha was brought under 25 resettlement villages'. Out of the settlers, about 10,000 households with an average of 5 family members were the victims of 1984/85 drought.

Apart from resettling the drought affected population, in an effort to reduce urban unemployment, the Derg resettled some unemployed urban dwellers drawn from major cities, especially from Addis Ababa. They were resettled at the foot of *Arkumbe* hill to the west of Gutin town. This group of settlers was the worst challenge to the Derg resettlement venture. Being young and well-acquainted with urban life, these people were proved to be unfit into the local setting.

From the outset, their main intention was to escape at any cost. They were kept only at the cost of physical coercion and threat of the armed forces. As Alula (1989: 18) aptly noted, the attempt to settle the urban unemployed, often against their will, led to massive desertion. These settlers fled the region as soon as the Derg regime collapsed in 1991.

The post-Derg Period (1991-2002).

The Post- Derg period is marked by radical changes in the Ethiopian political and economic landscape. It was a period when a new government led by the Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power and declared an end

to the command economy and forced resettlement. Adherence to market economy, banning of involuntary resettlements and cooperative farms, the regionalization of the country along ethno-linguistic lines and the subsequent adoption of federal system of government ushered tremendous transformations throughout the country. These changes have also put their marks on the future of study area.

Following the demise of the military regime, the settlers were left free to decide their own fate. According to local informants, as soon as they attained freedom of action, the settlers abandoned the cooperative farms apportioning their communal properties including the land. Each household was said to have been allotted 1.5 ha. In addition to this, strong and ambitious settlers seized extra lands found in their surroundings and managed to extend their private holdings by manifold. This enabled them to produce surplus not by increasing productivity per hectare, but by bringing extra farm plots under cultivation.

Thanks to the new policy and the settlers' individual efforts, within a short period of time, the former drought victims became not only self sufficient but also surplus producers. They not only produced varieties of crops, but also engaged in grain trade. Apart from local markets, they started to send their produce as far as Bahir-Dar and Gondar in Amhara Regional State and even Shire in Tigray. This striking success attracted the interest of land-hungry peasants in Gojjam and Gondar as a potential area for self-initiated migration and resettlement.¹⁶

¹⁶Initially, the success of the *Walloye* and *Tigraian* settlers in *Gutin* was only a matter of rumor, but later, when as a result of the opening of the *Nekemte-Bure* road (early 1990s) people from *Gaojjam* and *Gondar* started to visit the region in an attempt to explore the existing economic opportunities, they discovered not only the truth about the settler's achievements, but also about the abundance of extra unsettled land for potential settlement. This was considered partly as the main reason for massive self-initiated migration.

Beside the success story, the abundance of vast tracts of arable land in *Angar Gutin*, its easy access to market centers and absence of a legal barrier stimulated the *Gojjame* and *Gondare* self-initiated resettlers to migrate and settle in the area. Initially, they came on individual basis to watch the situation. Some of them were employed as daily laborers or sharecroppers on the holdings of the former resettlers or the local population. But later, as they got acquainted with the setting, they started to seize extra lands in the area, which enabled them to attract their families and relatives; thus giving the new migration a massive character (Zelalem, 2004).

Despite the central government's regionalization policy that should have discouraged inter-regional migrations and resettlements, spontaneous migration increased by leaps and bounds. The newcomers penetrated deep into the vast uninhabited areas and seized large hectares of land without any restriction.

They neither asked permission from the local authorities nor notified their arrival to any one. In the words of Ato Desu Sori, the chairman of the Gutin Town Administration during my field visit in the area, they simply over-flooded the lowland regions of *Gida-Kiremu, Abe-Dongor and Limu Districts*. As could be seen from the data gathered from Gutin Town and four surrounding kebeles (*see table 3*), the 1990s were the period of renewed spontaneous migration and settlement of a large number of the Amhara population predominantly coming from *Gojjam* and *Gondar*.

Table 3. Population of Gutin town and surrounding Kebeles.

S/N	Kebele	Number of Population			Remarks
		Male	Female	Total	
1	Gutin town Kebele 01 and 02	10,279	8744	19,023	
2	Woyin Amba	2,111	2874	4,985	
3	Dabra Anbessa	1604	1446	3,050	
4	Addis Alem	3345	2558	5,901	
5	Lalistu Angar	11,432	13,990	25,422	
6	Andode Dicho				Data not available
Grand Total		28,796	29,612	58,381	

Data Source: Local D. As (Development Agents in each Kebele), May 2006.

The above information is obtained from the lowland kebeles of Gidda Kiremu district. This is actually a portion of what is conventionally known as Angar-Gutin resettlement project. Data from the other two districts, namely, *Abe-Dongoro* and *Limu*, are not included because of various constraints. Despite its incompleteness, the above information shows the magnitude of population increase in the area. Such uncontrolled and spontaneous migration of peoples to the region, as we shall see in the proceeding discussion, inflicted colossal damage on the natural environment of the area.

The Ecological Dimension of the State Sponsored and Spontaneous Resettlements.

The movement of peoples from place to place in search of a better living is as old as human history. Historical evidences confirm that human beings as hunters and gatherers or as food producers have moved across spaces in search of food, water, conducive settlement areas, etc. These movements took place either within limited geographical areas designated as regions, countries, continents or cut across these geographical designations. The magnitude of the movements also differs from individual penetrations to massive migrations.

Viewed from this broader perspective, the recent population movements in Ethiopia are neither unique nor unprecedented. They happened over the ages and centuries. Whatever their causes and motives might be, history provides a wide range of examples for such movements irrespective of geographical locations and ethno-linguistic backgrounds. People have moved in all directions throughout all times. For instance, the Semites, i.e., the ancestors of the present day *Tigrayan* and *Amhara* population of Ethiopia were said to have migrated from the Arabian Peninsula. Crossing the Red Sea, they settled in northern Ethiopia during the first millennium B.C. (See Zelalem, 1995). After a long period of intermarriage and mingling with the local population, there emerged the current ethno-linguistic makeup that came to be known as the *Tigrayan* and the *Amhara*. Like wise, the Cushitic stocks of people including the Oromo, the Somali and others moved throughout the Horn of Africa over the centuries. The great population movement of the 16th century spearheaded by the Oromo could explain the absolute certainty of this fact.

Yet, all these movements and population migrations did not exert a pressure of such magnitude on the environment as they do today. This is probably because the pace at which people exploit the existing natural resources, the technologies they employ in appropriating nature for their own benefit and their number itself are totally different. Of course, one may argue that the agricultural technology employed by most Ethiopians over the past millennium has made no significant change so as to bring a devastating impact on the environment. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the absence of technological transformation in Ethiopian agriculture is at the same time the agent and effect of the dwindling natural resources and agricultural production itself.

On the one hand, the use of obsolete technology in agricultural activities constrains the expansion and development of the

agricultural sector; on the other, it accelerates the degradation of agricultural land thereby enhancing the conveyance of more and more plots of virgin land under cultivation. In other words, as the existing fertile land relinquishes its fertility because of over exploitation and the utilization of backward agricultural technology, extra lands are always required to produce sufficient food to sustain life. This vicious circle can be broken only through technological transformation, which the Ethiopian economy lacked throughout history.

Besides the spatial expansion of agriculture, the demographic explosion that this country experienced over the last successive decades also exerted enormous pressure on its land, water and forest resources. The combined effect of these multiple factors means that, both the carrying capacity of the land and the quality of the soil in highland Ethiopia is diminishing at an unprecedented rate. The deterioration of the natural environment, as we all know, is one of the major causes for the recurrent drought situation in this country that pushed thousands of people from their original places of domicile in search of new fertile lands for resettlement. The resettlement of the drought affected population in *Angar Gutin* starting from the end of the 70s was largely associated with the above-mentioned reasons. Their resettlement in the area has had far reaching implications both environmentally and in terms of ethno-social relations. Since my purpose here is to analyze the environmental dimension of the problem, emphasis will be made on the impacts of the concentration of a large number of populations on the regional ecosystem.

Angar Gutin, the home for a variety wild life as it was formerly known by the indigenous population, turned into a settlement of extended dimension (with *Gutin* town alone harboring over 10,000 people as its dwellers). This happened practically within a period of less than two decades. The vast stretch of land surrounding *Gutin* town was also settled by tens of thousands of

agricultural populations that exert various degrees of pressure on the environment.

As was to be expected, greater human interference in the natural ecosystem led to depletion of wildlife and forest coverage. So far, changes of cataclysmic proportion did not happen in the area. Yet, one can expect a looming disaster of that dimension, and indeed, one should not wait until devastation of such dimension takes place. The pace at which forest clearing is carried out indicates an approaching danger. The method employed for clearing of the forest, which involves indiscriminate burning of forests, woodlands and their undergrowth poses, a great menace both to the forest and wildlife. It destroys the forest coverage leaving many animals dead and other species like birds without protection and habitation.

The forest, as a natural abode to wild life and a source of moisture, is the basis of human life as well. The destruction of this asset means acceleration of a disaster that puts both human and wild life at risk of extermination. History tells us that to the extent people have altered their environment; they have also been prone to its influence and vagaries. What people are doing in *Angar Gutin* and its environs today is no exception.

But what is the reason for such a great concern in this area? Is there any ecological disaster threatening the population of the area so far? If yes, disaster of what kind and of what magnitude? If not, why do then people are being frustrated? How do the local populations comprehend this situation? Is it really a great concern as of today or of the future? These are some of the salient queries that need appropriate answers in this part of our study.

The rationale behind the current concern is that, since the time of anthropogenesis, the environment has been woven into human lives in many respects. Be it in developed, developing or poor economies, peoples' relationship with natural resources is strong. A glance at the economic history of the peoples of Ethiopia alone can provide vivid evidences in this respect. It shows that Ethiopians are directly dependent on natural resources for their livelihood, which implies that they are heavily vulnerable to environmental changes as well. As they depend heavily on rain-fed agriculture as their major economic activity, the absence or a simple alteration in rainfall patterns induces crop failure and the subsequent famine. As already indicated, it is indeed this problem, which forced the northern population to migrate to places like Angar *Gutin*.

The above reality is getting the recognition of the local population and the settler communities themselves. In this regard, one of my informants in *Gutin*, Ato Adem Feleke, (a settler from Wallo), stated the following:

*If, the forest destruction continues at the current pace, and if, more and more people from the north continue to come and occupy the forestlands without any restriction and burn it down to the ashes as they do it today, another drought and famine is inevitable. This time, however, we are going to starve not as Walloyes, but as peoples of Wollega.*¹⁷

The old man's concern is shared by the younger generation as well. As of now, the situation seems normal, added a young *Walloye* settler, *Baye Molla*, who came together with his parents and resettled in the outskirts of *Gutin* in 1984 when he was only ten years old.

¹⁷ Interview: Ato Adem Feleke, May 2004, *Gutin*.

*But, we young people already started to face both the problem of land scarcity and the result of forest depletion upon ourselves. Because, previously as teenagers we were not allotted plots of land for cultivation, now when we are grown up and became family heads, however, self-initiated settlers who recently came from Gojjam seized the extra lands in the area. Some of them occupied up to 100 hectares individually, while we, who settled in this region earlier than them couldn't find even the formal 1.5-hectares of land. What is left for us is another migration and resettlement in new areas.*¹⁸

I met a number of such young men in *Gutin* and its environs who agreed with Baye concerning the situation. They perceive the situation in which they find themselves precarious for various reasons: first, as of now, no land redistribution or opening up of virgin land is envisaged in the area; hence, they do not harbor any hope of acquiring farm plots in the foreseeable future; secondly, there is no alternative employment opportunity in the area that would enable them support their families in a sustainable manner; and finally, they are not educated enough or exposed to any form of vocational or technical training to migrate to urban centers in search of alternative employment opportunities in other economic sectors.

Thus, as a remedy to their plight, they expressed readiness to join another resettlement scheme, if the government is willing to organize. Some of them even described how they made unsuccessful individual attempts to penetrate into the *Benishangul-Gumuz* region hoping to obtain farm plots. Though unsuccessful at the moment because of the hostility of the local community towards them, they told me that they would try it again sometime in the future.

¹⁸ Interview: Ato Baye Molla, May 2004, Gutin

Their information conveys two messages: on the one hand, it indicates how they really comprehend the negative impacts of uncontrolled resettlement on human life and the environment by creating scarcity of agricultural land and diminishing natural wealth. On the other, it shows how these people, because of the precarious situation in which they find themselves, have developed a mobile mindset, i.e., readiness to move anywhere if given better opportunity. When asked from where this mobile psychology has come about, they reiterated that:

Our grand fathers first migrated from Wallo either to Gondar or Gojjam in search of extra land and better livelihood; our fathers continued the southern march and came to Wollega for similar purposes. Now we are in a state of scarcity and insecurity. Then, why not we search for better life somewhere else, where there is abundant land and opportunity for work? Nothing is new and strange about this. We have already been accustomed to such a mobile mode of life and developed that mindset.¹⁹

Sentiments attached to one's own place of birth and *nostalgia* associated to those localities, which their ancestors used to designate as 'agare'; 'wanze' or compatriots known as 'ya wanz lidge' or 'ya agar lidge' or kinsmen called 'Zamad' have already lost their pertinence as mechanisms holding or creating psychological bondage between the new generation, places of birth and kinfolk. Besides, it shows an inter-generational conflict arising from incongruent entitlement rights to the land.

All these conditions witness the existence of multiple insecurities: first, the second generation settler communities who were not allotted agricultural land feel insecure, because, no land allocation or redistribution is envisaged at least in the near future. In its turn, creation of a family in the absence of access to

basic means of earning a living generates uncertainty about what lies ahead. Furthermore, uncertainty about one's own future curtails long-term planning and discourages people from caring about the environment in which they live. Second, even those who one way or another acquired the land do not harbor the necessary attachment to the environment and the region where they inhabit for two reasons. On the one hand, the plots on which they live and work are not even their private properties and they paid nothing to acquire them. Hence, they are not motivated to care about the land gained free of charges.

On the other, the regionalization of the country along ethnic lines has created a suspicious mindset among the settler communities that they may be evicted from the land by local authorities.¹⁹

Thus, even if they feel concerned about its current productivity and abundance, given that these qualities determine the level of production; and even if they are well aware of the fact that diminishing plot size and loss of fertility could undermine the level of their income, they do not intend to make a long-term investment to improve the environment. Rather, they would try to pull out what ever capital they earn to their original places of domicile, i.e., to those Regional States where they came from. Such a dual feeling toward the land seems to have hampered environmental conservation on the one hand and discouraged upholding of long-standing traditional resource management wisdom. On the other hand, it also discouraged the adoption of new conservationist ideas.

In light of all these situations, the absence of strong institutional arrangement, which is concerned with natural resource

¹⁹ This sense has become overwhelming among the settler communities, especially after the year 2000, following the eviction of some spontaneous settlers in connection with the inter-ethnic conflict in Gidda-Kiremu that flared into open armed clash in September-October 2000 (see Zelalem 2004).

management, and the laissez-faire approach toward environmental care in the area since the collapse of the Derg regime seems to have contributed to the current havoc and the dwindling interest in environmental protection. In contrast, the local Oromo communities hold strong bondage with their place of birth called 'biyya' or kinfolk known as 'komoo.' Moreover, they harbor a strong feeling of entitlement to the land, its resources and well-being. Hence, they vigorously express their deepest concern about the looming ecological disaster. They are even more resolute when it comes to the activities of the recent northern settlers in the area. One of my informants, an educated man and the then chairperson of *Gutin* Town Administration, Ato Dessu Sori, stated that:

*Our ancestors preserved this land together with its forest and wildlife for generations. But the northerners destroyed it within a decade. It is very sad to see how these people burn vast forestlands and extinguish wildlife. Of course no one is against wise and proper utilization of natural resources, but what these people are doing is unethical, unwise and a barbarous act.*²⁰

When asked what is to be done, *Ato Dessu* reiterated that, first of all, it is necessary to halt farther migration to *Angar Gutin*. Secondly, a formal land management and resource utilization policy should be put in place so as to ensure wise and proper utilization of natural resources. The proper management he entails refers to delineating between arable and non-arable lands available in the area, i.e., distinguishing between the proportion of land occupied by people as of now and the unsettled ones. And further delimitation of the amount of hectares to be allotted for individual farmers and those which should be reserved as forest zone. He added that a well organized and transparent land administration system is needed to alleviate this problem. So far,

²⁰ Interview: Ato Dessu Sori, May 2004, Gutin.

reafforestation program is not an issue in this area, but conservation of the existing ones, banning of arbitrary forest clearing and uncontrolled burnings are very crucial.

Summary and Conclusion.

Summarizing what has been said so far, it is necessary to underscore the following points: a) the severely dwindling environmental wealth in the area under study is leading to a drastic loss of the regional biodiversity, while the poor resource management in practice is exacerbating the situation; b) apart from the effects of state-sponsored resettlements, unrestrained influx of a large number of self-initiated squatters from the north and the high natural demographic increase in the area, in the face of persistent utilization of obsolete farming techniques and poor resource management means, an ever increasing overpopulation and over-exploitation of natural resources for mere survival, i.e., a high demand for more agricultural land as well as high demand for wood as a source of household energy and construction activities; c) all these factors coupled with absence of better land resource management and tenure insecurity make the area in the near future a place in which people depend on rain-fed agriculture, but without forests. This situation in its turn will make the whole region drought vulnerable leading to another disaster of worst consequences.

The question is then, what is to be done? Answering this question is not an easy task. Apparently, there is no readily available answer for such a delicate issue as ensuring environmental sustainability. Nonetheless, empirical observation of the situation and analysis of past experiences enable us to suggest that environmental conservation behavior, especially forest resource conservation of rural household, is dependent on two specific conditions: traditional values attached to forest resources and market values.

Traditional resource conservation wisdom is rooted in indigenous knowledge about the linkage between nature and society rather than temporary economic benefits. Modern values entrenched in consumerist ideals in contrast attach more credence to comparative economic advantages. The tragedy in our resettlement areas, however, is that while traditional conservationist practices operating in the original homelands of settler communities were forgotten because of relocation and their rejuvenation is hampered by tenure insecurity, modern ways of conserving forest resources, especially for their commercial value is either at its infancy or non-existent.

With constant relocations induced either by disaster or by government resettlement policies, settler communities in the current research area have developed a strictly temporary utilitarian attitude towards the natural environment. They clear forests either for agricultural purposes or for household energy and construction without due necessity for their replacement. This sentiment brought about depletion of forest resources for short-term economic benefits rather than conserving them for long-term reimbursements. On the one hand, being contradictory to the local resource management wisdom, this practice initiates conflict with the host communities. On the other, it accelerates environmental degradation, especially by depleting forest coverage, which is a natural abode to varieties of wildlife.

The concern here is, therefore, twofold: at a macro level, since the effects of environmental degradation in relation to economic activities manifest themselves at often large distances from the source or the agent causing them, i.e., a distance both in terms of *space* and *time* and since these effects have the capacity to shift on to other people, to future generation and even other species, there is an assumption that in the long run as Opschoor (1999) aptly puts, this micro level forest destruction would contribute to a larger disaster of sub-regional magnitude. At a micro level, if we let this condition happen at the current rate, there is a high possibility that the Angar-Gutin area will experience similar

environmental degradation as northern Ethiopia from where the current settler communities migrated. This in its turn will lead to another wave of migration lending the process a vicious character.

The lesson from Angar Gutin is that large-scale resettlement ventures are not always environmentally friendly. Despite short-term economic benefits, they lead to long-term devastation of the natural environment thereby replicating the problem all over the nation. The data from this site also indicated how settler communities tend to develop mobile psychology, which discourages attachment to the area where they live and minimizes efforts towards long-term environmental conservation.

This behavior in turn discourages the rejuvenation of traditional conservationist practices exercised collectively to preserve the natural ecosystem.²¹ This seems to emanate from lack of interest toward long-term planning because of diminishing attachment to the new environment that in its turn arise from tenure insecurity. This, however, does not mean that resettlers do not plant trees of any sort. Of course, they do grow perennial crop trees such as mango, orange, chat as well as eucalyptus, which are of important commercial value. They plant these trees in their homesteads. Nonetheless, these activities do not bring about sustainable environmental conservation. Rather, they show the short-term utilitarian nature of the activities practiced in the area.

The other long-term implication prevailing in resettlement areas as exhibited in Angar-Gutin is associated with inter-generational gap and further parceling of land into smaller plots/land fragmentation. As indicated earlier, even if the government

²¹ For instance, the northern resettlers, who used to plant trees around Churches in the form of '*atsed*' or protect forests on the consecrated land called "*be Wigz yetekeber den*", and those who used to practice protection of forest schemes associated with Islamic faith known as *Wijjib* have either completely forgotten such practices or pay less attention towards them.

allocates enough plots to the newly settling households, in the long run, because of the dynamic increase in population, one cannot rule out further parceling of farm plots among the new labor entrants or conveyance of extra plots (forestlands) under cultivation.

The above process in its turn creates two problems: on the one hand, further division of farm plots into smaller pieces and allocation of extra lands in the area for new labor entrants (grown up children) have their own limitations. Because land by itself is a limited resource one cannot keep on dividing up to the infinite, its constant parceling will undoubtedly create a problem of scarcity in the long run. On the other, since there is no agricultural labor release, i.e., the transformation of agricultural laborers into industrial ones (because of the absence of an industrial sector that absorbs extra labor), there will be a conflict between the generation of new labor entrants, who cannot afford to obtain neither land nor employment opportunity, and the older generation possessing entitlement rights to agricultural land. This inter-generational conflict might end up both initiating new migration and resettlement of the landless generation somewhere else (rural to urban migration, inter rural migration or another resettlement) or creating social unrest with unpredictable consequence.

Policy Implications

Given the above situation, despite its short-term significance (as temporary tension diffusing mechanism), resettlement program as a major food security strategy in the long-term is not feasible. It is harmful both environmentally and socially for it induces rapid forest resource depletion and social conflict. This leads to the rethinking of our development strategy. In order that the problem is fully addressed, non-agricultural sectors, especially the industrial sector, should be given due attention so as to

absorb the excess rural labor and ease pressure on land and forest resources.²²

Industrial development has multiple effects in this regard: first, by absorbing excess labor from rural areas it reduces pressure on land; prevents further parceling of agricultural land thereby alleviating social tensions arising from land scarcity; second, expansion of agro-processing industries provides sustainable market for agricultural products; third, industry provides agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, etc., and ensures increasing productivity; finally, the linkage between the two sectors brings about the overall development of the economy with lesser damage on the natural environment.

The other area of intervention is the use of alternative energy sources. Studies show that, although alternative energy sources, such as solar and geothermal energies place Ethiopia among countries with high potential of energy resources, so far, nearly all the share of consumed energy potential is limited to hydroelectric power, which by itself is dependent on the fluctuation of the size of water in major rivers. In view of the increasingly dwindling forest coverage of the country, which is the source of moisture and rain, in the long run, there is a fear that the country's capacity to produce hydroelectric power itself could be put in a state of jeopardy.

All the above arguments show that with less than 3 % of the estimated total land area under forest cover, Ethiopia needs a policy change to ultimately deal with the problem and boost forest conservation. It cannot afford to undertake further resettlement activities in the remaining meager forestlands because further resettlement would mean further devastation of the remaining forest coverage and conversion of the entire nation

²² Heightened concern about environment here does not imply environmental fetishism. Rather, it shows to what extent the well-being of the natural environment affects economic and social development.

into a drought-vulnerable entity. Policy change, therefore, would mean reversing the looming ecological disaster and breaking the vicious circle of environmental crisis from which much of this country's problems emanate.

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