



Widow Achala Gora is worried about the future. Will she be able to keep her small patch of land, or is she going to lose it to investors? If she can't keep the field, she will have to go to one of the refugee camps and get her rations from the international community.

Photo: Jörg Böhling

VILLAGISATION – BETTER LIVING CONDITIONS FOR THE POPULATION OR A PRETEXT FOR LAND EVICTIONS?

With its extensive resettlement programme, the Ethiopian government is promising people improved access to government services. In reality, however, its policy is resulting in forced displacement, conflicts over scarce resources and ethnic tension. And ultimately to hunger, as the example of the west Ethiopian region of Gambela shows.

By Klaus Sieg

When smallholder Mark Ojulu wants to work in his field of maize, he faces nearly an hour's walk to get there. Just like his village neighbours. Since they were resettled by the Ethiopian government six years ago, they have had to cover long distances to get to their fields. And they are not the only ones in this situation in the Ethiopian region of Gambela. According to estimates by human rights organisations, between 50,000 and 70,000 smallholders living in widely scattered communities in the swampy bushland bordering on South Sudan had to abandon their ancestral holdings in order to live in compact villages in future.

ONLY FEW PROMISES KEPT

Villagisation is the name of the programme. It is meant to provide people with more education and healthcare, roads, granaries and better

protection. That's what the government says in the capital. Critics maintain that the programme is being used to clear the land for international investors. "The promises they gave us haven't been kept," says Mark Ojulu, passing the first clay huts of his village on the way back from the field. People still lack a granary that would spare them the tedious task of grinding grain by hand. And they can only visit a doctor in the next small town that they are separated from by several miles of dusty dirt track.

At least Mark Ojulu is still managing the family's cropland. But for how long? Officially, all the land belongs to the government. There are no tenancy agreements or other securities for the smallholders. "We would be screwed without the land," says Ojulu. Around twelve people live on the yield of the little maize field, which is hardly more than half the size of a football pitch. Apart from his small son,

his wife and her mother, several relatives and some needy neighbours depend on the field.

Ojulu's fears appear to be justified. In the course of villagisation, many smallholders in Gambela have already lost their cropland and pastures. The international organisation Human Rights Watch speaks of eviction and even forced displacement – despite all protestations to the contrary by the government in Addis Ababa.

"Nearly all the resettled village inhabitants come from areas in which the land was allocated to investors," says a staff member of a local non-governmental organisation that is involved in rural development programmes in the region. The organisation wishes to remain anonymous – just like smallholder Mark Ojulu and the other actors in this article. Critics quickly end up in prison in Ethiopia.

TAX REVENUE FOR THE GOVERNMENT

But what makes this region so attractive for agricultural investors? Gambela's lowlands are crossed by several tributaries of the Blue Nile. These rivers wash up fertile sediments. However, the agricultural corporations are not only lured by the good soils. Since international corporations, business people and finance funds discovered farmland as a means of investment, the Ethiopian government has been allocating it with revenue that makes the coffers ring, with investors paying just a handful of dollars per hectare and year. So far, this has attracted around 50 of them to the East African country, from Turkey, China, India or Pakistan. According to a report published by the UK's Financial Times, the Central Government has leased an area almost the size of Belgium so far. Over the next few years, it seeks to allocate a similar amount of land, much of which lies in Gambela.

According to the proponents, this is the only way to modernise agriculture and the infrastructure. "The elite is getting rich with land allocation at the expense of the little people and is robbing them of their livelihoods," the NGO staff member complains. "Some of these investors don't even cultivate the land. They just cut down the trees, make charcoal and disappear."

Engaging in industrial agriculture in this very remote region is a challenge. There are hardly any asphalt roads for heavy plant or lorries to carry the harvest. Also, it is difficult for investors to find qualified staff for their farms. Moreover, Gambela has extreme weather patterns, and heat and drought alternate with torrential rains and floods. For instance, large portions of the land owned by Indian investors Karuturi Global have been literally submerged. The world's largest producer of cut flowers and self-proclaimed King of Roses intended to grow rice and grain in Gambela. Now many thousand hectares lie fallow. The government wants to withdraw the concession it awarded to this corporation.

But the smallholders have lost their land. They have had to retreat to areas lying far away, with poor soil, little water and scant pasture grass. Quite a few of them now depend on the United Nations World Food Programme.

THE WFP AS A LIFELINE

For years, the United Nations has been supporting war and civil war refugees from South

Poor roads in the remote region of Gambela are a challenge for heavy harvesting machinery or lorries carrying the harvest.

Photo: Jörg Böhling



Sudan. First, these people fled from Sudan to get away from the wars of independence against the North. Since 2013, they have been seeking refuge from the murderous civil war that is raging in what is now an independent South Sudan. Nearly 300,000 South Sudanese are living in Gambela, most of them in camps. Almost daily, there are new arrivals of people who have crossed the hardly secured frontier.

While state-of-the-art machinery is at work in the surrounding fields harvesting rice for exports, the refugees from South Sudan have to rely on the UN World Food Programme supplies. And so do other people. The same ethnic groups, the Annuak and the Nuer, live on both sides of the border. Locals also succeed in being registered as refugees. Empty grain sacks bearing the World Food Programme logo or USAID tins containing edible oil made out of peanuts are a frequent sight in the villages. Thus the United Nations is also sparing those people from hunger who were driven out in the course of land allocation to the large-scale investors.

THE SAUDI STAR 0.5 MILLION HECTARE PROJECT

Mark Ojulu is not yet one of them, despite the activities of Saudi Star, one of the really big investors, close to his village. This corporation, which belongs to Saudi magnate Mo-

ammed al-Amoudi, has just acquired a 4,000 hectare farm that goes back to the period of military dictatorship. In the 1980s, supported by the Soviet Union, the Derg regime started a number of large-scale farms. To Saudi Star, this farm stemming from socialist days is just an extension of its venture. As early as 2009, the corporation was cultivating rice in an area of around 10,000 hectares in the region. In the long term, the cultivated area is to grow to a size of half a million hectares. Already, the fields seem to stretch to the horizon. The Financial Times report says that the harvests of the past seasons were way below what had been reckoned with, the reason for this being too little rain.

In the future, Saudi Star wants to trim its cropland and artificially irrigate it to raise yields. In addition, construction is in progress of a 21-kilometre-long irrigation canal that is to be fed by a reservoir built in the Derg days. The 100-million-dollar project is to be completed already this year. It is hoped that this venture will ensure rich harvests. The prices will ultimately decide whether crops are for exports or for the national market.

However, it is smallholders like Mark Ojulu who supply the Ethiopian population with food. The major share of them work to feed their own families. A mere five per cent of the food consumed in Ethiopia comes from the large-scale farms.



Around twelve people live on the yield that farmer Mark Ojulu harvests from his little maize field.

Photo: Jörg Böhling

REFUGEE CRISIS CREATING TENSION

Mark Ojulu's neighbour Achala Gora fled from South Sudan with her four children four years ago. "We ran off head-over-heels as the skirmishes between the army and the rebels got closer and closer," the 35-year-old woman explains, leaning against the wall of her house and looking across the small yard. For days, the family fled on foot across the war-torn land until they finally reached Ethiopia. Achala Gora did not want to go to a refugee camp. Conditions are cramped there. People live in tents or huts made of tarpaulins. They are stressed and lack any prospects. Rows, violence, vandalism and theft are the order of the day. "And there are no possibilities to keep livestock or chickens, grow crops or create a livelihood," Achala Gora says.

Here in the village, she has relatives who have provided her with a small house, and she recently received a small patch of land from the village community to grow maize, sorghum and vegetables. The locals and the refugees in the village are members of the Annuak. Family ties across the frontier are frequent, and a culture of sharing is maintained. Nevertheless, the tens of thousands of people who have fled across the border with little more than the clothes they were wearing are a considerable strain, and tension and disputes often develop

over cropland or pastures and waterholes for the livestock. Young men in particular have brushes with each other.

NO SECURITY

Suddenly, one of the village elders appears in the dusk. Armed men were sighted, he reports. They could again be Murle, from South Sudan. Only forest and bushland is left between the village and the border with South Sudan. Two years ago, gangs probably belonging to this ethnic group came across the border and stole both livestock and a large group of children. They killed more than 180 people. In this village, too, some families are mourning the deaths of their children. "Nobody protects us from the violence of these gangs," says one of the orphaned fathers, shouldering his rifle. He shows us the scar of a gunshot wound he got in the raid last year. Together with two other armed villagers, he sets off to comb the surrounding district for intruders. More security was promised for the people when the village was centralised. But a small troop of soldiers only get there after several hours.

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Imprint

Rural 21 –
The International Journal
for Rural Development

Published by:
DLG-Verlag GmbH
Frankfurt, Germany

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Design & Layout:
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Editorial office, distribution, advertising:
DLG-Verlag GmbH
Eschborner Landstraße 122
60489 Frankfurt, Germany

Printed by:
Brühsche Universitäts-
druckerei GmbH & Co KG
35396 Gießen, Germany

Rural 21 is published four times per year.
The subscription rate is 33.– Euro (Germany),
37.– Euro (EU countries), 51.– Euro (non-EU
countries) and 8.30 Euro per issue, plus postage.
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Druck | ID 11599-1712-1001

