

# NES COMMENTARY No.17



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*“Charity corrupts; long-term charity corrupts long-term”<sup>1</sup>*

*“With good governance (democratic governance-NES), most African countries could be net exporters of agricultural produce”<sup>2</sup>*

**Title: From the Edge to Over the Edge: The root cause of the food crises is the endemic governance crises in Ethiopia!**

## **1. Introduction**

In Ethiopia food aid/dependency continues to persist for over three decades now since the 1974 famine! Food security and independence continue to recede. Schemes like the food security strategy by the regime in power (1996) has not made any difference to change the food dependency situation of the country running now for over a generation with no clear way yet in place to get the country out of this unacceptable predicament. Since the great famine of 1974- it is 34 years now! - Every year, whether there is rain, harvest or drought something

<sup>1</sup> See David Elleman: Helping People Help themselves: from the World Bank to an Alternative philosophy of Development; Michigan University Press, Ann Arbor, 2006, p.12)

<sup>2</sup>Darren, Lobatse Darren, Botswana quoted by Martin Plaut, BBC Africa Analyst, Africa's Hunger-a systemic Crises, January 3 1,2006

between 5 to 10 million people have always relied on food aid from outside. It has been reported that the number of hungry people have not grown less over time since this regime came to power in May 1991. This situation has prompted the country to be diminished and condemned by the following type of unflattering commentaries: On February 2, 2006 BBC reporter Peter Greste wrote from Mekele, northern Ethiopia: **“Like a patient addicted to pain killers, Ethiopia seems hooked on aid. “** He added: **“For most of the past three decades, it has survived on millions tonnes of donated food and millions of dollars in cash. It has received more emergency support than any other African nation in that time.”**

At present a reported 9 million people in Ethiopia need food aid under conditions when food prices have been pushed up by inflation and food supply difficulties preoccupy the managers of the world economy. The cost of living has been rising and the hardship ordinary people are facing is beyond forbearance in Ethiopia. It is hard times now in Ethiopia for the people, though the elite continue to live a life of opulence with cold and cruel indifference to the plight of ordinary people’s lives.

## **2. Endemic governance crisis at the root of Ethiopia’s food aid addiction**

Any country that has been in the situation Ethiopia has been for a generation, that is to say, not being in a position to feed oneself is invariably a country that suffers from endemic governance crises. Any Government that has not developed a comprehensive and integrated system of agricultural production to assure a sustainable food security framework in a country fails to command respect and legitimacy for extending its tenure. The regime in Ethiopia has been full of contrivance and deception in playing ‘democracy’ more as a ***game of deception*** rather than as ***a principle of governance*** to find workable arrangements with moral, intellectual and political integrity to solve the age-old governance problems of the country.

## 2.1 Democracy played more as a *game* rather than *principle*

Very often and invariably, this is what the regime does to the people when it plays the so-called democracy game: the regime invites the people for an election charade only to disabuse them when they vote for the candidates or parties of their choice by harassing those not toeing the official line backed by the military and police might at its disposal. Why the regime prefers to go through the motion of an election, when it has literally zero interest or commitment to honour the choices and voices of the people particularly when they vote for opposition party candidates, strikes any impartial observer as nothing else but activities that are supremely diversionary, opportunistic, cynical and immoral. It is the regime's indulgence which appears to be a cruel joke on the people. It would have been more honest not to play the multi-party game when in reality the regime knows that it has neither the intention nor the courage to afford to relinquish power through the verdict of the people based on their free votes, voices and choices.

It would have been honest not to disabuse the people by dishing out voting cards and calling them out to vote when the regime has no intention to honour the results especially when the votes goes against the candidates it fielded to continue and prolong its tenure.

The recent boycott of the local elections by even the loyal opposition shows, if it proves anything that the regime has regressed far beyond anything one expected to happen away from the democratic gains that appeared during the May 2005 election. The regime is far from solving the governance crises with democracy. It does not seem interested in solving the governance crises in the country in general.

**If it has no principled commitment to solve the governance crisis, invariably it shows that it has no strategy to break out of the vicious cycle of food aid dependency.**

To be sure, Ethiopia is one of the few countries that should benefit from creating a system where political transitions come through competing parties that must also have the culture and maturity to consult each other

by privileging the higher good for solving such intractable difficulties such as establishing sustainable food security and fresh water provisions for the population as a whole. It is far too late for Ethiopia to be in a situation where it is not able to create a political culture where political transition can take place without deception and violence by mounting proper discussion, conversation, debate, policy distillation and finally by means of votes and elections that are conducted with rules, norms and procedures that are open and accountable, as they are free and fair both in reality and perception.

What is even more alarming is how the existing ethnic-vernacular pattern of political arrangement has been manipulated by the ruling group in the country since 1991 by creating a double problem to the country.

The first is fear that those who rule have to remain in power since they cannot imagine what may happen to them, if they are voted out by fair democratic means. They invoke scenarios of ‘Rwanda type genocide in Ethiopia,’ should they lose and they spread fear amongst their core supporters that any opposition win means ‘death and killing’ to them! This fear-mongering was invoked in the pre- and post- May 2005 election leading to the shooting that got hundreds of innocent people killed in the end and finally many elected opposition MPs and civil society activists to land in jail.

The second is the proliferation of opposition parties, fronts and armed groups that seem to be recreating the same pattern of political fighting that existed in the pre-1991 period. Those opposition groups that demand self-rule paradoxically from a regime that claims whatever record one thinks it has, the one it continues to broadcast as success is its ‘contribution’ to have created a ‘system of self-rule’ encapsulated in the 1995 Constitution that has parcelled governance according to the division of the national framework of Ethiopian citizenship according to the description of Ethiopia as ‘peoples, nations and nationalities.’

Together from these two actions of current regime politics emerge the inevitable consequences: the blackmail of genocide is invoked to limit the full democratisation of the country for an indefinite time, and the claim

that it has created self-rule is belied by the proliferation of parties and fronts fighting for self- government. If 'self-rule' have been established, as claimed by the regime, why would all these forces proliferate then to fight for 'self-rule'? The fact that self- governance is not recognised at the local level, in reality has embroiled the country into a theatre for various types of contradictory military actions producing the hazard that at stake has become nothing else but the very survival of Ethiopia itself!

What the regime's parcelling of the nation and the national citizen by erecting vernacular-ethnic political boundaries did was not to create trust but mistrust, not to consolidate the national framework, but to divide and rule by fragmenting and weakening national citizenship, not to unify and mobilise the nation but to create miscommunication and suspicion, not to satisfy the demand for self-rule on the bases of shared rule, but to exacerbate past and present conflicts and force many groups to even resort into armed fight against the regime. The regime is confronted with all these consequence in spite of its claims of recognising the self-determination of 'peoples, nations and nationalities' ostensibly according to its now discarded Stalinist canon to forge national unity. This is the abstract story. The reality is that the national idea and framework for citizenship engagement and expression that is capable of imparting equal treatment of diverse groups has been undermined and protesters have not gone to sleep. At the moment, there is increasingly and alarmingly more inter-group mistrust and barriers of communication between the people now than an attained and renewed culture of national civic engagement to unite the people and the nation to address the most important problem that any Government must be able to address itself and not contract out to donors- that is, to feed and nourish the people without making it a habit to beg others.

All those that have developed and those developing countries like China and India have first and foremost addressed the food problem before they addressed their major development problems. In India food security has been the major concern of all the political parties. The country plans and expects within the next four years to provide not only food but also fresh water 100 % to the over 1 billion Indians!

There can be no credible sustained national development project without first and foremost feeding ones people. Not to organise ones agricultural system with an integrated approach combining irrigation, innovation, seed varieties, biotechnology, farming technology, multi-seasonal cultivation, spreading and diffusing education and scientific culture so that the farmers become responsive and forward looking, shows a failure of governance. There can be no systematic agriculture without an organised approach to stem the deforestation, erosion, desertification, water shortages, improved cultivation methods and techniques, sustainable land management practices, clearing of woodlands and so on. “The direct costs of loss of soil and essential nutrients due to unsustainable land management is estimated to be about three percent of agricultural GDP or \$106 million (1994 \$). Other modelling work suggests that the loss of agricultural value between 2000-2010 will be a huge \$7 billion”<sup>3</sup> The signs are that unless the situation is reversed by creating a national mobilisation by fostering legitimacy, the road is likely to be rough. Improving the governance situation of the country therefore brooks no delay for all those who wish to see a well- fed Ethiopian population sooner than later.

Therefore at the core of the food crises lies a much deeper governance crisis that is endemic as it is anti-democratic, indifferent, cynical, immoral and unjust to the plight of those vulnerable sections of Ethiopian society.

### **3. Ethiopia cannot go on living on food charity for ever!**

To give may be easier, but to receive is harder. There is so much one loses when one is a recipient of foreign aid. The latter is often doled out in ways that make it recurrent and essential very often to the detriment of the recipient. It is not always the case that foreign aid solves such critical problems such as feeding ones nation. Feeding a nation must be the responsibility of the Government and citizens of a country. It cannot be contracted out to outsiders to help feed a nation. One off help may be necessary and unavoidable when vulnerabilities strike and foreign aid may be useful sometimes depending on how it is given. But if the help continues year in and year out, it comes at the expense of a nation’s necessary confidence to take its own development chances by itself. It

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<sup>3</sup> See Leonard Berry’s land Degradation in Ethiopia: its extent and Impact, May 2003, P.2

can cripple a country's agency. Loss of confidence that is often purchased by being aid addicted invariably undermines the national will and effort to build capacities, capabilities and innovative competence to deal with ones own problems by using ones own ingenuities, resources, imagination and the mobilisation of talent, tolerance, technology, knowledge, human and institutional efforts.

Some analysts say: ‘

‘Just as it is hard to show aid has beneficial results, it is difficult to prove it has negative ones.’<sup>4</sup>

Whether aid has beneficial or negative results, the sovereign matter of feeding ones own country must be a matter of national concern and effort where food dependency is firmly displaced by a national food security framework that works.

### **3.1. Food aid dependency saps national self- confidence**

What kind of confidence can the nation have, if Ethiopia continues to suffer from headline news such as the following year in and year out over a generation now: “Ethiopia food aid ‘habit’ worsens locked into a vicious downward spiral of food aid dependency” (BBC News Nov 1, 2006)? After nearly a year the Herald Tribune confirms the same story line: by its reporter Jeffery Gettleman:”Ethiopia (is) thwarting food aid to rebel region in East” (July 22, 2007.). Similar allegations abound where the people who need help are reported to be abused by those who are meant to help them in the Ogden areas now!

This type of projection of the country's situation not only destroys its image but also saps its confidence. This situation has been taken to an extreme length by some to comment wryly and metaphorically that: “**It is not rains in Ethiopia you need to worry about, but whether it rains in America or Canada**”” What this means is that if there is food shortage in

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Allan et al, **Poverty in the 21st Century**, p.209.

the food aid giving or supplying countries, then it means that the people who depend on the charity of these countries will have no where to return.

Now that time seems to have come. The world food economy is in crises. The World Bank says 'food price crisis imperils 100 million in poor countries' (R.Zoellick, April 14, 2008). Lo and behold! Long-term food aid addicted countries will have to deal with limited food supply that may or may not be available even by paying exorbitant inflationary prices. When such dire situation imposes itself, hunger and starvation follow. Together they lead to chronic famine. Governments that continue to beg food cannot get what they used to, if more countries need food aid. Invariably the preference will probably go to the countries that have not been food dependency addicted and those that fell to the misfortune because of the vagaries of climate, weather or the shrinkage of arable land due to the misguided utilisation of such land for bio-fuels and other water-thirsty and land hungry flower-rose production that our country at the moment has been exposed too as well.

#### **4. From food aid dependency to food security independence**

For over a generation Ethiopia has been living on food aid charity. That it went into this unacceptable situation in the first place may be understandable given the historic problems, threats and internal governance crises it has confronted for thousands of years. But that, in the present time, with a regime that tirelessly broadcast its 'democratic credentials willy-nilly' and claims it has 'governance' under control, how come the country is still described as food-aid -addicted?

That there is a failure to evolve a strategy to get out of the vicious cycle of food aid dependency is not condonable. The regime has now been in power for nearly 20 years. If one thing that it should have done well is to provide a national food security framework that tackles at the root the food problem in the country. Nobody can take responsibility for this except the regime in power for the way the country has not been able to come out of hunger and starvation. That regime acolytes would like to blame the world

food economy and excuse the regime's responsibility will not wash or stick.

If this regime had been serious in solving the food dependency problem, it will have started by trying to create synergies that combine and interlink the national political and economic system in order to make it infinitely productive to address critical problems with efficiency and strategy. The regime would have brought into systemic connection national policies, institutions, knowledge and research, incentives to come to bear and address the vital matter of agricultural transformation. It will have a methodology of learning from implementing both from specific sector-specific national strategies as well as micro- foundational local-level mobilisations and actions. Both mistakes and successes will be sources of learning and constant iterative feedback will be used to inform policy to make the system as a whole responsive to the needs and wellbeing of the people for whom Governance is meant to serve and support.

Analysts at the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research claim that the agricultural sector accounts for 40 % of GDP, 90 % of exports, 85 % of employment, and 90 % of the poor in the country. They say that largely due to land shortage, per capita land area has fallen from 0.5 ha in the 1960s to only 0.2 ha by 2005. If land per hectare is shrinking, how are the farmers to introduce new technology that is costly to improve the yield per hectare and build agricultural- based wealth? How can they benefit from a biotechnology revolution that may require they share the costs to harvest the gains with economies of scale and economies of scope?

Add to this even a more alarming matter that can seriously undermine a nation to forge ahead. Ethiopia has something like 3 % of the population of tertiary age enrolled in higher education. It has 21 researchers per 1 million inhabitants. Its expenditure on R & D as a percentage of GDP is 0.2 %. Over 30 % of the research funding comes from donors! It produces less patents and scientific publications than Kenya with Ethiopia boasting more than twice the number of people Kenya has!

For Ethiopia to move from food dependency to food security, it requires to build a national research, knowledge and training system capable of feeding into a national system of production and innovation to provide a strong framework for establishing food security on a sustainable pedigree. This requires that Ethiopia builds a knowledge- infrastructure and R & D support that can stimulate a radical revision of the agrarian system by systematically creating a comprehensive biotechnological revolution using modern information technology systems and diffusing them across the breadth and depth of the land. This requires a new national imagination, where Ethiopia is upgraded into an Ethiopia-Africa nation combining its diversities and managing it rather than degrading into many vernacular ethnic nations, nationalities and peoples!

The national framework is a necessary condition for providing the food security framework. Without a national framework, Ethiopia will find it very difficult to break out of the food aid dependency situation it is in- a problem that has afflicted it for over a generation since the famine of 1974 that ended the traditional imperial order.

## **5. Conflating Ethiopian hunger with American poverty!**

Some regime acolytes outrageously defend the prevalence of food aid dependency and hunger and poverty by conflating and equating poverty in the USA with that in Ethiopia. This is like comparing oranges and apples. The USA is not a food addicted and dependent country. It is a country that has a welfare system. There is no comparison between the poverty and extreme deprivation in Ethiopia and the USA. If such regime acolytes can go to such extreme of defending their bankrupt policies, that have not changed the hunger situation in the country, by allusions that falsely equate and create symmetry with the poverty in the USA, how can anyone believe such intellectually weak and fragile persons will ever help Ethiopia to get out of its cursed and humiliating food dependency situation? They resort to sophistry and blackmail rather than addressing seriously what has gone wrong and how remedies that the people can own may be forged together by creating the climate of tolerance for the best ideas to guide the country out of the morass it is in.

What is required is to create the conditions that all that have the desire and commitment to contribute can enter into a national united effort for the singular and focused purpose of accomplishing the mission of getting Ethiopia out of its hunger predilection.

By accomplishing a shared mission together, the achievement creates a historic feeling victory just like that of Adwa or any other major success the country had in coming out from food aid dependency to the era of food security for national development.

This transformation will change the status and reputation of the country for good and will be recorded as probably the most significant achievement of the country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

These same acolytes, who may have self-interest in the growing flower business, allege that much arable land that is dedicated to the flower business has no impact on the struggle of Ethiopians to emerge from food aid dependency. Given how much land owned by farmers has shrunk, any arable land leased to the flower business is land lost for growing much needed food. There is an opportunity cost that no matter how much one lies to oneself and be in denial, land dedicated to land-hungry and water thirsty flower-rose farming comes at the expense of land for food production in the context of severe shrinkage of hectare of land per person in the country. Ethiopia has now 10-12 % arable land and with a commitment more land can be redeveloped with modern scientific techniques to rescue it from its current diminishing trajectories.

Given the prevalence of food aid dependency and the limited arable land the country enjoys currently, any leasing of significant portion of arable land for the land hungry and thirsty flower business can only come at the expense of securing a national framework to create food security. It shows a misplaced priority by the regime which does not seem to feel shame as we all do that the country is unacceptably in a food aid dependency predicament for so long. We all say the country must come out of this prolonged food dependency situation sooner than later using its arable land

to create food self-sufficiency. This will make the few business persons who benefit from the flower growing and selling industry and their Dutch suppliers of flower seeds irate, but it will make Ethiopia proud to attain national food security.

The world food economy will continue to fluctuate, but those countries that have systematically aligned their policy systems with their national framework for establishing and sustaining food security can both engage and protect themselves from the vagaries of the world economy. It is absolutely stupid to give up and say a nation's fate is to continue begging for food because of the fluctuations of world food market in the world economy. That attitude again shows an unbelievable intellectual weakness of those who seem not to bother if people continue to starve. The acolytes want to blame the country's bad reputation as food aid addicted nation on all those who suggest a strong national food security framework is long overdue. How can those who are trying to find ways to address this critical problem be to blame, when, in reality, what imparts bad reputation is the fact that the country has not been able to break out of food aid dependency dilemma it has been in for such a long time?

What is very worrying is how intellectually weak and bankrupt are all those who try to defend the regime's unacceptable policies of maintaining food aid dependency. Instead of working to help bring food security, they resort to all sorts of subterfuges to defend the status quo of food aid dependency. They even resort to blackmail and criminal allegations against those who genuinely are searching to find ways that can bring all those involved to contribute the best to help their country attain comprehensive national framework for food security and development.

## **6: Concluding Remark: The call for this generation**

It will be a big shame to pass the twin crises: governance and food - to the next generations. That will be very selfish. It will create inter-generational

tyranny rather than freedom and opportunity. It will be highly irresponsible. This generation of Ethiopians must strive and be resourceful and tolerant enough to engage with a culture of democratic debate to make sure that the over-generation old food crises and governance crises come to an end for good that have been hounding the country for far too long time now.

A new chapter of policy debate and proper ventilation and distillation of ideas is necessary to make sure this country modernises, unifies, democratises and creates justice. Food dependency is tied to lack of democratic governance. An endemic crisis of governance undermines the very capacity, capability and innovation to create a sustainable food security framework for the nation. Instead of imposing a state of intolerance and irresponsibility by blackmailing and threatening democrats such as our NES with preposterous accusations of alleged links to 'terrorist organisations', the thing to do is to admit that there is a serious problem of democracy, justice, unification and modernisation deficits with this regime that feed into distorting government's role in solving the real challenges and problems of food, water, bread and butter that the people deserve to have as a matter of right and not privilege.

In the final analyses, this generation has to make a choice- fulfil the dream a food self-sufficient nation that is capable of launching its own development path with courage and knowledge or remain static on the beaten path of food dependency by failing to confront head on this vital problem due to lack of courage, knowledge and will. We can either cross the bridge by using our creative powers and imagination or remain like the shameless and self-centred, boastful and lying regime acolytes by claiming the regime is doing great when it keeps getting slaps on the face for not getting both governance and food security right. There can be no excuse to allow food aid dependency to continue unchallenged. Neither criminalising nor blackmailing us will work to deter us from highlighting the situation that the least able amongst us find them trapped in Ethiopia.

We will do all we can to articulate what is keeping the people, whose voice is often ignored by arrogant power, in a state of food aid dependent

situation, and what things must change to change their condition. We must imagine, dream and work hard to realise our images of a well-fed country by improving both governance and food security to get all fed more as a principle of entitlement rather than privilege. That is the true challenge of this generation, never to leave this task of governance and food crises to the next generation.

We say from food aid dependency to national food security now!!! This is a generational call to all to stand up and not give up the fight because food is a right to life and liberty for all Ethiopians.

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