Yekatit 11 and Rural and Agricultural Transformation in Ethiopia

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Introduction

This piece has three parts. Part one tries to trace the experiences gained during the armed struggle of the people of Tigray in terms of rural and agricultural transformation, and relate them to the policy and strategy frameworks designed by the EPRDF when it took over state power after the fall of the Derg. The second part deals with the outcomes of those policy and strategies; and part three briefly addresses, by way of conclusion, the political, moral and ethical principles set out by the TPLF during the armed struggle.

PART I.

The fortieth anniversary of the start of armed struggle of the people of Tigray was colourfully celebrated in Mekelle on Yekatit 11, 2007 (18 February, 2015). The celebrations were made the more poignant by the presence of families of martyrs of the armed struggle. Residents of Mekelle, citizens from other cities and villages within Tigray, and Ethiopia at large, turned out in great numbers. President Mulatu Teshome and Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn of Ethiopia, President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir of Sudan, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud of Somalia, Prime Minister Abdoulkader Kamil Mohamed of Djibouti, and Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda of Uganda, African Union Commission Chairperson Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma and many other invited guests were also in attendance. The mantra of the celebrations was Yekatit 11 is the foundation of our tenacity and renaissance.

Of the various momentous events and educational workshops conducted, the two most significant were the recognition of and award to martyrs’ families, some of whom lost up to five to seven members. The second one is that sister organisations of the TPLF, which are members of the EPRDF, have come out and declared in clear terms that the TPLF had played the central role and that the people of Tigray paid the lion’s share of the sacrifice in getting Ethiopia to where it is today. The story of the struggle of the people of Tigray, which is a story of incredible determination, discipline, and sacrifice, was never fully told to the Ethiopian people in the years since the fall of the Derg. This time, however, the people of Ethiopia got a glimpse of the huge price that was paid to get the country to where it is right now. The full story is yet to be written.

The founders of the TPLF began1 the armed struggle in February 1975 fully cognizant of the fact that the vast majority of the Ethiopian people lived in rural areas where communities bore the brunt of oppression and exploitation. The movement, therefore, had to have at its core the interests of those communities. In doing so, the founders were hoping to begin to address the fundamental issues that were raised by the student movement. Among the

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1 Sehule came to this writer’s TAHADU office in Shire-Endaselase on 10 Yekatit 1967 (1975) and informed him that they were leaving for the bush the same day in the evening, bade him farewell and left.
most critical of the issues were “መሬት ታላሹ” (land to the tiller); and “ህዝባዊ መንግስት ይመስረት” (let people’s government be established).

To this end, the concept of rural and agricultural transformation in Tigray began in earnest in the jungles of Dedebit. The beginning of rural and agricultural transformation was, therefore, initiated by the radical land reform that the TPLF carried out in areas it liberated from the Derg. Although land reform was proclaimed by the Derg in the whole of Ethiopia in 1975, actual land distribution was implemented by the TPLF in Tigray. The peasants themselves, with oversight by the organization, carried out the distribution and men and women were equal beneficiaries.

Not only did the liberated areas carry out radical land reform but they also established “ባይቶ” (Baitoes) - people’s assemblies - through which they run their affairs. The people elected members of the councils, which established laws and managed to run their affairs without interference from anybody, including the TPLF to the extent allowed by the war environment in which they found themselves at the time. They also established three-member “courts under trees” which handled village socio-economic conflicts skillfully and with integrity. Lessons learnt from the Baitos contributed as inputs to the new Constitution of Ethiopia.

In addition to agricultural reform, education programmes were designed and implemented by training fighters and children from communities under the administration of the TPLF. The schools run up to grade eight. Experiences gained from the school programme served as inputs for drawing up the new education and training policy of Ethiopia after the fall of the Derg, which was adopted together with its sector strategy in 1994.

Another important area that was introduced during the armed struggle, and which served as the basis for the on-going resources management and development, was the concept of closure, management and development of natural resources. The TPLF created a department of agriculture, which was responsible for carrying out agricultural development, natural resources protection, management and development. Communities were organized to protect their watershed areas from humans and animals through closures so that those areas could be rehabilitated. Areas were identified and defined on a watershed basis and communities organized to do soil and water conservation works in an integrated manner with the plots of land they worked on and the adjacent hills. Farmers would also be organized to divert rivers during the dry season to irrigate their land and advised to flood-irrigate their land from the surrounding hills during the rainy season.

There were various such sites during the armed struggle. One site which stood out as a shining and very useful example was a village called Shewatta in Abergelle woreda, Tembien (at that time) Awraja. The farmers in Shewatta were well-organized and used the river diversion and flood irrigation techniques in a way that enabled them to produce enough food and were thus able to stay in their village during the 1977 E.C. (1984-85) famine crisis. There were also sites like Idaga Aarbi and others which served the same purpose. The tegadelti (fighters) that were dedicated to such work included the late Meles Bezabih who headed the Department of Agriculture, Berhane Russia, Afera Teklehaimanot, and others.

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2 Although this writer witnessed in person how the “under-tree courts” handled cases during the armed struggle, it was impressive and gratifying to hear some of the former “under tree-judges” eloquently reminiscing in their interviews on Tigray Television during the 40th anniversary celebrations. Perhaps, deep at heart, they might have been trying to compare their experiences with the realities of today on the ground, which leave much to be desired.
Lessons learnt in the struggle such as community-based participatory watershed development activities and using trained development workers in the development and management of natural resources were incorporated into the MERET (Managing Environmental Resources to Enable Transitions to more sustainable livelihoods) when it was reorganized in 1999. MERET is a country-wide natural resources development and management programme, which is implemented throughout Ethiopia.

One village which benefitted from the MERET programme and set a shining example to others is Abraha Atsebeha in Tigray. Population pressure had caused massive deforestation and soil degradation, therefore leading to inadequate production in the village. Two options were thus put forward to the people of the village by Government: either to move to be resettled elsewhere; or carry out a new land management plan in accordance with the MERET programme. The people of the village opted for the second choice. They worked hard under the leadership of Gebremicael Gidey Berhe (Abahawi) and rehabilitated their village. Today Abraha Atsebeha village is serving as showcase for all environmental rehabilitation works in the whole of Ethiopia and beyond. In 2012, Abahawi and the people of Abraha Atsebeha were awarded in Rio de Janeiro the UNDP Equator Prize for transforming their village.

Another example is Damot Mountain in Wolaita Zone which follows the MERET system. The farmers in the surrounding localities had been displaced by degradation of land. Using the participatory watershed development activities method, they have managed to rehabilitate the Damot Mountain and have been able to improve their agricultural productivity and production.3

The MERET experience was showcased at the 2009 Copenhagen United Nations Climate Change Conference. The Permanent Representation Office of Ethiopia to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Agencies (FAO, WFP, IFAD), in Rome, Italy, the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) organized an Exhibition and Forum during the Copenhagen Conference based on the experience of MERET in Ethiopia. This was the Conference where the former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia made a very powerful speech to the heads of state and government on behalf of Africa on 16th December 2009. He told the Conference, “Every one of us knows that Africa has contributed virtually nothing to global warming but has been hit first and hardest”.

During the evening on the same day, we organized a forum on MERET, with former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi as the guest of honour. Other members of the podium included Chairperson of the African Union Commission Jean Ping and WFP Executive Director Josette Sheeran4.

**The most trying challenge of the armed struggle**

The Derg had eight well-organised campaigns against the armed struggle of the people of Tigray. However, while the TPLF managed to counter all military campaigns, there was one challenge of a different nature which could have had very serious implications for the armed struggle. This was the 1984-85 famine in Tigray and parts of Wollo. At the time, the Derg had designed a strategy of “dry the sea to catch the fish”. It appeared that nature too had come on the Derg’s side. Taking advantage of the famine crisis, the Derg devised a scheme to ‘dry up the sea’. The starving people were told to gather in certain areas that the Derg designated and informed them to collect relief food from there. When they came, they

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4 The forum was moderated by this writer.
were forcibly loaded onto Lorries and transported to western parts of Ethiopia for "resettlement". People were forcibly taken from wherever they were gathered, including market places and regardless of whether whole families were together or not.

In addition, even though food aid was coming into the country, the Derg would not allow relief assistance into areas of Tigray that were outside of its control. As a result, the TPLF had to come up with ways to get assistance to reach those areas. However, even if assistance could be procured, there was no road network that connected Tigray to the Sudan which was the only outlet. The only connection to the Sudan was through Eritrea. When the organization was able to obtain food assistance from international relief organizations, the TPLF requested permission from the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) to allow relief food through territories it controlled.

However, in a display of unbelievable cruelty and indecency, the EPLF refused access because it was not in good terms with the TPLF at the period. TPLF had thus to quickly devise two strategies: one was to organize the people in Western Tigray to work on an access road from there to the Sudan border and transport in food assistance by and distribute through the Relief Society of Tigray (REST). The second and most difficult was to organise draught-affected people beginning from southern to central and on to western Tigray in teams and have them walk to Eastern Sudan.

This life-saving undertaking was the most trying episode of the armed struggle. Fighters carrying children on one side and Kalashnikovs on the other managed to lead famine affected Ethiopians to where there was life-saving assistance in Eastern Sudan. The TPLF managed to get over 200,000 people to the Sudan through this method. The hospitality of the Government and people of Sudan in those trying times was touching, invaluable and unforgettable. The organisations that provided food assistance were equally commendable.

Two events are worth mentioning here. The first one was the scene at the distribution center. When the people arrived at the refugee camps in the Sudan, relief food was already in place in the refugee camps. The people were organized in teams, the same way they were in in their villages, in preparation for the food distribution. They then would wait until they were called out to get their relief rations turn by turn. They didn't rush and throng the trucks to get at the lifesaving food sacks piled up in front of them as seen in many similar situations and as I suspect the representatives of donor agencies expected them to do. They, however, sat and patiently waited their turns in an incredible display of discipline and dignity. It was a scene that this writer will never forget. That sense of pride and dignity was what amazed and struck the international relief workers as well.

The other, and even more significant point worth mentioning here, is the strategy the TPLF devised to make sure that able bodied men from the refugee camps went back to their respective villages before the rainy season started. To that end, a few months after the refugees’ arrival in the Sudan, the TPLF organized a return journey back for the men to cultivate their land. The final step in this saga was then for the men to return to refugee camps in the Sudan to bring back home family members after the harvest.

The home return was meticulously organized as well and understandably was very festive. Sudanese officials and residents of the surrounding areas and members of the international relief workers were present. This writer remembers some Sudanese officers carrying children for some distance and bidding the people farewell. It was indeed a display of friendship and solidarity of the Sudanese people. Furthermore, international relief workers and donors deserve great appreciation for their life-saving role in this saga as well.
This undertaking would be no easy feat to accomplish in peace times. To be able to plan and execute such an endeavor that involved that many number of people while at the same time fighting the Derg is simply remarkable. Here again, the international relief workers felt the TPLF was being irresponsible to send back men to the famine areas. However, the decision to first send the men to their villages before the next onset of the long rains did prove to be the right course of action.

One thing that needs to be mentioned here again relates to the situation of the people that were forcibly taken by the Derg from their villages for “resettlement” in western parts of Ethiopia. Some of them managed to escape and were able to reach refugee camps in Sudan; while others returned directly to their villages in Tigray. This writer managed to interview some from both groups. Some of the refugees interviewed in the Sudanese camps said that they lost members of their families in two ways. Some of them, not having been familiar to the area, inadvertently ended up in jungles and lost family members to wild animals. There were still others, who encountered hostile groups that murdered some of the men, and abducted women and children.

PART II.

Rural and Agricultural Transformation Policy of Ethiopia

In the 2007 census, the total population was 73,750,932 out of which 83.9% of both sexes were rural. The figures for women and men, respectively, were: 49.5% and 50.5%. The forecast for 2015 is 90,074,000, out of which 49.7% is estimated to be female and 50.3% male. The male to female ratio remains more or less the same between 2007 and 2015. Rural population in 2015 is projected to be 80.6% of the total population for both sexes. The urban population stands at 19.4% as per the projection of 2015.

The population projection for 2030 shows as follows: total population 122,317,000; urban 32,919,000; and rural 89,398,000. This comes to urban 26.9%; and rural population 73.1%. For 2025, the picture looks as follows: total projected population 111,653,000; urban 27,051,000; and rural 84,601,000. This is urban 24%; and rural population 76%. The ratio of men to women remains more or less the same in both periods with men 50.1% and female maintaining 49.9% proportion. What is important to note in these forecasts is that the vast majority of the population in both periods remains rural. And this has serious policy implication.

It is such reality which caused the EPRDF Government to design the Agriculture Development-led Industrialisation Strategy, based on experience of the armed struggle and which placed the rural populations in general at the forefront. Policies and strategic frameworks geared towards achieving rural and agricultural transformation have been in operation since the formation of the EPRDF Government. At centre-stage of these frameworks are the smallholder (family) farmers and pastoralists. With the large majority of the population being dependent on agriculture and pastoralism for its livelihood, transformation of this sector through various strategies and programmes has been a major undertaking of the Government. 5

Following the launching of an agricultural and rural development policy in 1994 (E.C.), the approach to transformation was radically changed. The agricultural extension services were revitalized and totally reorganized. The on-going extension service system, which has been improved over previous ones, is based on the package approach and known as

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“participatory demonstration, training, and extension system” (PADETES). The progress made since the adoption of PADETES is very impressive.

To train development extension workers, twenty five Technical and Vocational Colleges (TVETs) were established which produced about 70,000 development workers so far. There are 10,227 development hubs, which serve as farmer training centres (FTCs). In each farmer's training centre, the following group of development workers is assigned: one crop; one livestock; and one natural resources development worker. In addition, one livestock health worker is assigned for three training centres. The number of livestock clinics has been growing to reach 2,275 by 2011. The number of farmers receiving extension services increased from 35,000 in 1995 to nine million in 2011. The number of agricultural service cooperatives increased from 14,423 in 2005 to 33,636 in 2011.

More improvement has still been made through the introduction of the Agricultural Growth Programme (AGP) which has been given even more prominence with the adoption of the 2011-2015 Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP). The AGP is a broad-based programme that attempts to improve the whole range of production, marketing and agro-processing of agricultural products through enhancing productivity, value addition, irrigation and market infrastructures. The AGP has four objectives:

1. Achieve sustainable increase in agricultural productivity and production,
2. Accelerate agricultural commercialization and agro-industrial development,
3. Reduce degradation and improve productivity of natural resources, and
4. Achieve universal food and nutrition security and protect vulnerable households from natural disasters.

Among the agencies that assist in the implementation of the AGP is the Ethiopian Agricultural Transformation Agency (ATA). The ATA was established by the Government, with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, in December 2010 as a catalyst for positive, transformational and sustainable change. The ATA introduced “line planting”, first in Teff, and then in other crops, where results have been impressive in terms of increase in productivity and production.

Overall, results of the AGP have been impressive and are expressed in the number of successful farmers (or model farmers) that are awarded both at regional and federal levels initially every year, now every second year. For instance, some 920 successful farmers and semi-pastoralists were awarded during the 7th farmers and semi-pastoralists award ceremony at Hawassa town held from 27 February to 1 March 2015. The theme of the festival was, “Dramatic change in productivity and harvesting”. The farmers and semi-pastoralists were pleased to receive awards for increasing their production and productivity, but raised the problem of finding market for their agricultural products. The share of women in the award was 30% and that of youth 20%.

One of the awardees from Eastern Gojam Zone said that he earned Birr 400,000 from coffee and Birr 200,000 from vegetables and fruits. His current saving, he said, is over Birr two million. Another farmer from Sidama Zone said his first award was from former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. In his current award, he stated that he now owns Birr 10,000,000 worth of assets. He further said that in the past, the word farmer was derogatory, but that it is a respected profession now, he is proud to be a farmer and an awardee. Most of the

7 The 920 include supporting organizations and institutions that contributed to the farmers' success.
awardees said that the reason for their success was proper implementation of the advice they got from the development workers and government support. They also expressed their wish for continued and enhanced technical support programmes and development of markets for their produce.

The positive results from the rural and agricultural policy, strategies and programmes could be further shown by the number of farmers and semi-pastoralists awarded at the sixth Federal level ceremony in 2005 (2013). The number of awardees was 580. There are eight criteria that enable farmers to get awards. The main ones include raising productivity and production; producing twice or thrice a year using underground or surface water; supporting and encouraging other farmers and semi-pastoralists; participating in and being at the forefront in community developmental activities, etc.

<table>
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<th>Name</th>
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<th>SNNP</th>
<th>Amhara</th>
<th>Tigray</th>
<th>Benishangul</th>
<th>Gambela</th>
<th>Harrari</th>
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The Table shows the type of awardees by region at ceremonies held at Federal level in 2008-9. Other organisations and institutions that contributed to the successes of the farmers and semi-pastoralists were also awarded. This tradition of awarding all who contribute to the success of farmers and semi-pastoralists has continued up to the 7th award ceremony held in Hawassa town in March 2015.

In 2011 (2003 E.C.), the award method was different from the previous two. The top three farmers and semi-pastoralists that excelled in capital accumulation from each region were the awardees for 2011. Accordingly, the aggregate capital of the one-to-three awardees in Oromia was Birr 48,358,000; for Amhara 23,278,453; SNNP 20,993,202; Tigray 6,358,681; Benishangul 1,972,000; Gambella 3,506,320; Harari 11,656,900; and Dire Dawa 3,753,550.

The Government is also making all the necessary preparations to enable industry to take the leading role over agriculture. However, the ratio of rural population projected for 2025 will still remain at 76%; and even 15 years from today (2030), it is projected to be 73.1%.

Although resource allocation so far has reflected rural priorities, which is commendable; nevertheless, it needs to be continued and even enhanced further in order to create vibrant rural economy that attracts energetic and enthusiastic youth. Expanding and strengthening amenities further to attract youth, both women and men, to remain in their localities is essential. More migration from rural areas to create bigger cities with slums should be

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9 Harari awardees’ activities include agricultural inputs and other trades and livestock production.
What is being achieved currently through the rural and agricultural policy, strategies and the various programmes is commendable. Tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of farmers have been able to own millions of Birr worth of assets in all parts of the country. These successful farmers need to be encouraged and supported to invest in agro-industries in rural areas where they will be more comfortable in their own environment so that they contribute to the creation of vibrant rural economies. It is clear that they are currently being encouraged; however, more needs to be done with full support of government to make use of their potential. They can play a major role in the development of the rural areas. This would require the need for policy direction to be geared more towards rural-urban balanced growth and development.

Communities in rural areas are the custodians of biodiversity and they are the protectors and manage natural resources. Enhancing amenities of life such as electricity, water and sanitation, health facilities, school systems, telecommunication, roads and market infrastructures, etc, may help to keep young people in situ rather than being drawn to urban centres and cause crowding in the cities.

The question of land tenure issue needs to be revisited. It is not clear whether the cadastral work that had begun some time ago has been completed throughout the country yet. Farmers were happy to receive photo identification cards indicating their use rights in areas where cadastral work has already been done. It will be an important measure if it is carried out for all farmers in the whole country.

PART III

By way of conclusion, it will be useful to point out another fundamental point that developed within the TPLF during the armed struggle with regard to the unwavering stance in adhering to the political, moral and ethical principles set out by the organization. The members were taught that the integrity of each one of them was integral to what defined the whole movement. No compromises were allowed. How was this principle manifested in the everyday lives of members? Several examples could be given but one example is the respect shown by the TPLF for individual and/or collective community property in areas they controlled. The TPLF would never touch individual or community owned properties. This was in spite of the difficult situation that the TPLF had faced especially during the initial years with regard to food and other supplies. One example could be cited here. At one time, a group of fighters was passing through a village, and a family invited them in and gave them food and water. When they left, one fighter forgot to return a water cup that belonged to the family and discovered this when he arrived in his camp. He told his comrades that he forgot to return the water cup to the family that offered them food and water. He was asked by his comrades to travel back immediately to the village for several hours and return the cup, which he did.

One additional example relates to an agricultural development project. In 1965 E.C. (1973), the Government of Ethiopia, for the first time, established an agricultural development project known as Tahtai Adiabo and Hadegti Agricultural Development Unit (TAHADU) in Sheraro and Badme, Tigray. The TAHADU was close by Dedebit, which is located in Laelai Adiabo. The objective of TAHADU was to resettle farming families that had shortage of land

10 The author was appointed director of the Project by the Government.
in the highlands of Tigray. During the first five-year phase, the plan was to resettle 24,000 families or 120,000 persons. The project was supported by the World Bank and had a good number of pickups, some Lorries, other equipment and money. Both Laelai and Tahtai Adiabo were dangerous areas at the time because they were infested with outlaws. Those outlaws would threaten the project workers and try to steal property of the Project. Another organization, which was giving problems to the Project, was the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which kept on harassing project staff, and stole project vehicles from time to time. It also attempted on a few occasions to kidnap project staff. On the other hand, the TPLF was trying to protect the Project because it believed that it would be useful for the people and encouraged staff to persevere. No resources of the Project were touched by the TPLF until 1969.

The deeply held principles (values) which developed in the jungles of Dedebit have not been easy to fully implement by the EPRDF in government. Rent-seeking continues to present itself as one of the most serious challenges to its governance. The documents consulted are listed below.

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11 The ELF tried a couple of times to kidnap this writer.
12 The author was imprisoned by the Derg in 1968 (1976), and as soon as this was known, the ELF came to dismantle the Project. This was aborted by the TPLF and whatever was available was taken care of by them. How many vehicles, equipment and other resources were taken by the TPLF and how useful this was would be known to the leadership of the TPLF of the time. Other than material resources, however, TAHADU workers such as Aregash Adane, Worede Gesesse, Zemicahael Gebremedhin, Roman Gebreselase, Meresa Gebremariam and many other names that the writer doesn’t remember now joined the struggle with the TPLF. The focal point between the Project and TPLF, Kahsai Berhe, was killed at the TAHADU Sheraro Office by Terenafit a few hours after they killed Sehule and his comrade at Addi Nebrid.
13 This is in spite of the fact that the Government has established Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission and Institution of the Ombudsman.
14 Documents consulted:
1. የጆብርናው የዘርፍ ያለፉት መጆች ያጠችመ ያጠጨሬ ትርጋ ያጠጨሬ ትርጋ ያጠጨሬ ትርጋ ያጠጨሬ ያጠጨሬ ትርጋ ከ1992 ድም
2. የጆብርና ፓርስ ያጠችመ ያጠጨሬ ያጠጨሬ ትርጋ ያጠጨሬ ትርጋ ያጠጨሬ ትርጋ ያጠጨሬ ከ1994 ድም