The Omo-Kuraz Sugar Development Project

A national survey conducted regarding the sector confirms that Ethiopia has more than 500,000 hectares of land suitable for sugarcane development. And, the abundant water resource, suitable climate and untouched fertile and irrigable land needed for the sector the nation is naturally endowed with demands a strategic plan that enables the country to utilize this huge potential effectively. Accordingly, the Five Years Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) the FDRE government has set is highly cognizant of these potential of the nation for the sector.

The sector is one among other key development issues believed to play a pivotal role in transforming the country’s economy to the level of those countries with middle income. This is because that the ten new sugar factories the nation has planned to build and is actively engaged in together with the concluded expansion projects on its existing sugar factories help the nation a great deal in doing away with not only of the import of sugar, fuel, kerosene, etc spending a very huge amount of money but also enable it to export sugar to the international market.

Moreover, the wide job opportunities the sector is capable of creating to citizens of this nation and the electric power these factories will generate and send to the national grid will also play a significant role to the country’s move to become an economy of industry led one. Therefore, as the sector is an indispensable one to the effort the country is aggressively exerting to get rid of poverty, it has won the full commitment of the FDRE government.

Accordingly, some selected areas of South Omo, Bench-Maji and Keffa zonal administration of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region are among others the FDRE government has identified as sites of huge potential for sugar development. Therefore, Sugar Corporation is here constructing five sugar factories among which three with a capacity of 12,000 TCD (Tone of Cane Crushed Per Day) and two with 24,000 TCD which contribute a lot to attain the above goals the country has set to reach by the end of the GTP period. These five factories will have a capacity of producing 1,946,000 tons of sugar per annum.

All the FDRE government development activities are geared towards the nation’s constitution. Article 8 No. 1 of the constitution states that nations, nationalities and peoples are the sole owners of power and have equal rights to benefit from the nation’s resources. Accordingly, the FDRE government, while running this and also other projects, gives priority to the all forms of benefit of natives of the project areas. And, it, prior to the inception of such projects, always holds discussion with the concerned
people and start running them getting their full consent. Furthermore, the government, more than anyone else takes care of the national as well as internationally registered heritages of the country of natural, cultural and religious nature. Therefore, there is no internationally registered historical, cultural, archeological and religious site to be affected due to the project.

**Socio-Economic Situation of the Command Areas of the Project**

The command area of the project encompasses selected areas of Salamago and Nyangatom Districts of South Omo Zone; Surma and Meinitshasha Districts of Bench-Maji and Diecha District of Kefa Zone while the total sugar plantation field of the project is 175,000 hectares.

According to the data gathered on a survey issued on July, 2011 the total population of the districts which the project encircles is 279,026. About 53,596 people are expected living in the actual project command areas. These areas are sparsely populated and the average population density of the districts as a whole is 9.6 persons per square kilometers and when it comes to the much selected actual point of land of the command area the population density will definitely get lower. Therefore, there will be no massive settlement program, let alone a massive resettlement.

The majority of the people living in and around the command area of the project are pastoralists leading their lives wondering around searching for grazing land and water of their cattle. Besides to this they had been repeatedly exposed to shortage of food due to erratic rainfall. There is no significant crop production going on in the project command area districts except small amount of crops grown using flood retreat farming. Therefore, those living on agriculture are very insignificant in number. And, the main food sources for the households are market crops, livestock products such as milk & meat.

These pastoralists have been leading their lives denied of infrastructures and social service giving institutions for a very long time. They knew no school, health stations, potable drinking water, flour mills, etc. marginalized to keep on leading their cumbersome day-to-day lives throughout their history. Generally, as the survey conducted shows, no cultivation or settlement is identified in the command area of the project. And, only some groups of the Kwegu of Nyangatom and the Bacha nationalities of Salamago District lead their lives on fishery using the riverbank of Omo.

On the other hand, very far away from the command area of the project, there are three national parks and one international heritage registered by UNESCO.
The inception of the Project at Salamago District & Its Pastoralists

Salamago District of South Omo Zone which is found some 750 Kilo Meters from the capital is the only area for the time being where sugar development activities of Sugar Corporation is started. The district has only three kebeles. Among the natives of this district namely: Bodi, Mursi, Bacha and Dimme, it is only some members of Dimme who are acquainted with agriculture while the rest are pastoralists who always move here and there in search of water and grazing land to their cattle. And, all living within and around the command area had never had access either to any kind of infrastructure or service giving institution.

It was after successive discussions of the leadership of both Sugar Corporation and authorities of the Federal and SNNP Regional Government with the natives, elders and scholars of all the command area of the project and then getting their full consent that Sugar Corporation kicks of the project. And, no one is going to be displaced as there had never been any settlement around. What there is going on is in fact a villagization program with a full consent of the natives.

And, it is only now with the inception of the Omo-Kuraz Sugar Development Project those natives of Salamago District begin to get the privileges of various infrastructures and social services. Now, the youth of these pastoralists have, for the first time, get the chance to be enrolled in schools constructed by Sugar Corporation. And, to enable natives become semi pastoralist, the corporation has made irrigable land ready to those who had joined the villagization program.
These all were possible for they voluntarily join the villagization program the SNNP Regional Government has conducted and become settled at villages with every facility made ready by the corporation prior their arrival. It must be clear enough here that the villagization program that emanates from the nation’s Agricultural Policy and aims at bringing about the country’s self reliance on food is being carried out in all the region including the command areas of the project.

Currently many natives have got job opportunities on the sugarcane plantation of the project. On the other hand, as the natives of the project’s command area had never had access to school and are left illiterate throughout their history, the corporation, in the short term, is found engaged in giving training programs that will equip them with various technical skills which will then help them get job opportunities in the various fields of work of the project. One worth mentioning instance in relation with this effort of the corporation is the training programs given to members of the natives which enabled them get job opportunities at the project. And, some among various professions the natives have been trained on at Jinka Construction and Industrial College and Chancho Tractor Operating Training Center are welding, building, carpentry, electric installations, painting, plastering, tractor operating, etc and all
of these trainees are now found working at the project in various professions. There are currently 106 small and micro enterprises engaged in different works of the project. The project, till the end of June, 2013 has created job opportunities to 6,695 citizens and out of the total 2,000 are natives.

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Moreover, the corporation together with other stakeholders have given due attention to the way of life of both these pastoralists and their cattle. One instance to this is the construction of cattle crossing structures being carried out over main and secondary canals and these structures are made at points of the land where the cattle of these pastoralists are earlier accustomed to use while moving around in search of water and grazing lands. The project has also created great market link to the natives which has enabled them get fair income, as never before, from the various products they are making available for sale. Moreover, Sugar Corporation is making water ponds accessible to the cattle of the natives while it is making irrigable plotting & grazing land available to them together with a residence garden to each household. Many natives have started growing maize on their irrigable land. Elementary schools of first and second cycle, health centers of both human and cattle, pastoralists training centers, kebele administration offices, community policing offices, residential houses of health extension and agriculture professionals, roads, etc are built and have started giving services to natives. Till end of June, 2013 around 22 social service giving institutions are built at three villages namely: Omo Hanna, Omo Rombie and Chedmis kebeles. Furthermore, signing contractual agreement with contractors, the corporation’s move to construct social service giving institutions at villages of Gura, Hailuwa of Murssi and Maki is found at different stages.

But, though all in vain, some forces that are working day-in and day-out to their own interest and lurk in the dark to deter our development efforts are disseminating destructive fairy tells being deaf and blind to all the aforementioned efforts of the corporation & the government.

All these efforts of the corporation in stopping the marginalization of the long forgotten pastoralists of Salamago District even at the early stage of the Omo-Kuraz Sugar Development Project are triggering interest among the natives of the whole command area to which the project will reach in the very near future. Here one has to note that these are the fruits of the project natives of Salamago District have started reaping at the preliminary stage of the implementation of Omo-Kuraz Sugar Development Project and the brightest future of these natives is to come!