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Reading the Narratives: Relocation, Investment and Development in Ethiopia

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This article examines the narratives presented on the subjects of relocation, investment and development in Ethiopia. In particular, we focus upon representations given by the Government of Ethiopia and Human Rights Watch (HRW) of the Gambella Region. The article deconstructs and critically assesses the discourse and the way in which representations and descriptions are made in order to advocate a particular position. We argue for a less polarizing and more comprehensive narrative from all parties. The article concludes with some reflections on the role and influence of advocacy reporting and, therefore, the responsibility in publishing such reports.

Keywords: narrative; critical analysis; Ethiopia; Gambella; development; Human Rights Watch

Introduction

The discussions surrounding the relocation of people in Gambella, the westernmost part of Ethiopia, are controversial and highly contested. Rights groups claim that the relocation programme, called villagization or the Commune Development Program, is responsible for gross human rights violations, whereas the Ethiopian government maintains that relocation occurs voluntarily and for the betterment of the people involved. The manifestation of villagization in Gambella was launched in 2010 and the programme forecasted that some 45,000 households would move into concentrated settlements with the objectives to improve service coverage and delivery. Rights groups question these motives and note that the relocation of people takes place in areas where land is leased to foreign investors for commercial agriculture. In 2012, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a report, 'Waiting here for death', which is highly critical of villagization and has subsequently become an important source internationally on the issue. The Ethiopian government on its part has not produced a matching document explaining the rationale behind the programme, but has been active countering the claims of HRW and other critical groups, mostly based outside of Ethiopia. These two actors, HRW and the Ethiopian government, are the two voices scrutinized in this study. This article will, however, not focus on resettlement activities, a

programme run by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development as part of the National Food Security Programme and with objectives to relocate food-insecure households from densely populated areas to those that the government considers to have available, productive farm land.

The article seeks to understand the meaning and implications of what is said, particularly as it relates to contested development. The narratives used to contextualize, and argue for a particular position, are built upon a perception of people, place and development. This vision is not merely a premise serving the purpose to prove a particular conclusion. The basis upon which a position is made also tells a story, it outlines a world view, and can be made more, or less, powerful on the basis of the proposed narrative. In addition, certain types of narratives are more appealing and persuasive, than others. An example of a critical narrative analysis from Ethiopia is the work of Abbink (2012), who analyses the positions taken by different parties in relation to mega-infrastructure projects. As with Abbink, this work does not strive to conclude with categorical judgement.

In the case of villagization in Gambella, opinions vary markedly. The subject is discussed locally, nationally and internationally. In the latter discourse, some advocate for cuts or halts to international aid, with lists of human rights violations in hand (see e.g. Oakland Institute, 2014), while others describe a voluntary and participatory process. Most commentators are in agreement, including the government, that more needs to be done to ensure that the services are sufficient, appropriate and provided in a timely fashion.

One of the limitations of this study is the exclusion of narratives provided by third-party diaspora groups, not least the Anywaa Survival Organization (ASO), which is active and well connected in its effort to raise awareness about the impacts of investment and resettlement in Gambella. One of the reasons that ASO has not been included is that its narratives have gained limited traction in national-level discussions, for example, neither HRW nor the Government of Ethiopia references ASO. An additional challenge in analysing the ASO narrative is that the organization's advocacy largely reproduces reports, videos and articles written by other groups and individuals, rather than producing its own material. However, ASO works closely with the Oakland Institute (such as co-publishing reports and press releases), whose reports have been included in this work. Arguably, ASO's most effective engagement is in the international realm, and it has established numerous relationships to further this work. This leads to a second limitation of this work, which is that only a cursory analysis of the international agencies involved is offered. Of particular note in this regard is the 'leaked' report of the World Bank, acknowledging that it 'did not meet the standards of a systematic or holistic assessment of risks' (World Bank, 2014, p. x), while also considering its relationship with the Government of Ethiopia 'a positive example of a development partnership' (World Bank, 2014, p. xiv). HRW (2012) reports that assessments conducted by UNICEF, USAID and DFID in 2011 and 2012 did not find evidence to support claims of human rights abuses. One challenge with these

reports, however, is that they are not official documents and have never been made fully public, making their assessment problematic. A second challenge that is faced by external agencies, as identified by Hammond (2008), is assessing the role of informal power in shaping 'voluntary action'. As pointed out by Abbink (2012) and Hammond (2008), the narratives of donors and international agencies tend to share an understanding of modernity and development with the Government of Ethiopia, which is achieved through technocratic processes offering little value to individual agency.

While the narratives of ASO and the international community are both important and influential, for this study to provide an in-depth analysis, it focuses upon two competing narratives, or narrative-makers, in the international domain. HRW was selected due to the global attention its reporting has received, which is explored in further detail below. The Government of Ethiopia, although having fewer communication works to analyse, was selected as the second narrative-maker as it is the implementing body of the relocation programmes, regulates investment and provides a national development narrative within which these activities take place. This is not to negate the existence of other narratives, nor diminish their importance. Rather, the two selected narratives are vocal, widely referred to and detailed.

Others have commented that there is a major gap in the contested narratives, namely that local people are not included and little is known of their ideas and opinions (Abbink, 2012). In this regard, it is noteworthy that local opinions and experiences may or may not align with ASO, which is based outside of Ethiopia, and ought to be considered as distinct narratives. Although some of this material exists, albeit in limited form, it was not included here. There are several reasons for this, one of which is that much of the existing data are in reality not open for analysis by third parties, for example, the interviews done by HRW. This makes it difficult to define a representative narrative for the involved population. Also, the objective of the study is not to provide an authoritative report of all narratives on the situation, but to deconstruct and critically assess two contesting narratives.

Although the study deals specifically with a regional villagization programme, it strikes a more general theme of diverging narratives between the Government of Ethiopia and parts of the international community. Arguably, the space between these two sides has increased rather than diminished over the past few years. In this situation, it is the hope of the researchers that this study might be applicable in a larger framework and to wider audiences engaging within contexts of contested development. We believe that this analysis will provide insights into understanding similar relationships and discourses where governmental and non-governmental discourses vary, and provide an example of a critical discourse analysis of how the respective narratives might be evaluated.

Context

Gambella is a regional-state in south-western Ethiopia, bordering South Sudan. The region covers nearly 30 thousand square kilometres and was home to 308,000 residents

in 2007, according to the latest national census (CSA, 2007). That figure has risen since, and Ethiopia's Central Statistical Agency projects the population to be 396,000 in 2014 (CSA, 2012). Within the wider context of Ethiopia, a nation of 93 million people, Gambella has a relatively low population density. It is also home to diverse ethnic groups, the two largest of which (Anuak and Nuer) are minority ethnic groups on the national level.

The region that is today known as Gambella was home to a vibrant colonial trading centre in the late 1800s and early 1900s; however, it was thereafter neglected by political entities, including after its annexation into Ethiopia in 1954. Medhane (2006, p. 4) states that in 'spite of its historical importance as a frontier between highland Christian Ethiopia and lowland Moslem Sudan, governments, development agencies and political analysts have generally ignored Gambella'. A detailed history of the people of Gambella is beyond the scope of this work; however, it is noteworthy that in addition to external neglect, the recent conflict in relation to relocation and investment has important historical context. Dereje (2009, p. 641) describes Gambella as 'one of the most conflict ridden regions in Ethiopia' and outlines five types of conflict that have affected the region and its people: inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic, local and migrant, state against ethnic groups and cross-border conflicts. Resettlement of northerners to Gambella dates back to at least 1985, when more than 17,000 households were relocated there (Steingraber, 1986). A 2006 report published by UNICEF, which precedes the influx of investors, states that Gambella has 'experienced increasing violence and armed conflict since the downfall of the Derg in 1991', with major outbreaks of violence between locals and migrants regarding land rights in 2003 (UNICEF, 2006, p. 12). The reception of investors in Gambella can only be fully understood when these contested land right issues are viewed as a long-term, dynamic and complex process. Today, Gambella is considered an 'emerging region' in Ethiopia. In addition to higher than national average rates of poverty, the region has higher than average rates for a number of negative health indicators, such as infant mortality (Macro International, 2008) and incidence of HIV (FHAPCO, 2010). However, in terms of literacy, the region scores better than most other regions in the country with an estimated literacy rate of 64% (national average 49.5%; CSA, 2012). Thus, even though Gambella is frequently compared with Somali, Afar and Benishangul-Gumuz as emerging regions characterized by 'general backwardness' (MoFA et al., 2007, p.4), the region is in fact better off than the other three when it comes to educational levels.

While relocation to Gambella has happened in the past, such as when 150,000 drought victims from northern Ethiopia were moved to Gambella in the mid-1980s (Library of Congress, 1991), the focus of the current analysis is upon the government villagization programmes of recent years. In Gambella, the government plans to relocate 45,000 households within the region into small towns, which, it argues, allows for improved service provision, such as education, health care and water (Davison, 2013). Sometimes, people are relocated small distances, such as a few miles, while in other cases, relocated people must walk for days to reach their destination. The

current government has not relocated people to different regional-states or districts, but within districts. This is a significant policy shift from programmes in the past.

The relocation of people into villages, called villagization, includes a major shift of livelihoods for many Gambellans, who are semi-nomadic, as pastoralists or shifting cultivators. In addition to villagization, Gambella is an area of Ethiopia that the government has targeted for large-scale agricultural development. A number of large investments, ranging from 10,000 to 100,000 hectares, have been completed with foreign entities; larger leases were reported but not finalized and/or are conditional expansion options (Keeley et al, 2014; Land Matrix, 2014). Large areas of land in Gambella are available for lease, potentially more than a third of the entire region. The overlap of time and place of these programmes has led some to suspect that one programme served the other; that villagization was being done to free up land for investors.

Government-sponsored relocation of people is not new to Ethiopia. Small-scale relocation programmes existed under Emperor Menelik II (1889–1913) and Emperor Haile Selassie (1930–1974), both of which are said to have been voluntary processes (Cohen and Isaksson, 1987). The largest relocation programme in Ethiopia was that run by the Derg regime (1974–1987, the leader of which, Mengistu Haile Mariam, also led the government that ruled until 1991), involving approximately 13 million people (Library of Congress, 1991). This programme included forced relocations (Magistad, 1987) and resulted in significant loss of life (Gebru, 2009). Of note of the resettlements that took place during this time is the influence of political objectives such as resettlement as a means to control conflict in the east (Cohen and Isaksson, 1987; De Waal, 1991), the role of large-scale famine and its political ramifications (Magistad, 1987; Terry, 2002), as well as international political alignments of the period (Gill, 2010). Although originally opposed to relocation, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, in office 1991 to present), re-started relocation programmes in the early 2000s. The political context at this time included the re-occurrence of droughts (1999–2000, 2002–2003), policy shifts towards greater market liberalization as well as shifts in the donor community pushing the government to consider new approaches to address chronic food insecurity and famine domestically (Devereux, 2009; Gill, 2010; Makki, 2014). At the same time, the Millennium Development Goals, and the donor funding aligned to it, pushed the government to expand coverage of service provision, including in education, health and water. Gambella is not unique in its engagement with villagization; however, the relative scale is. A majority of the people living in this relatively low-populated region are planned to be involved. Also not unique to Gambella is the role of foreign investment in agricultural land leases, neighbouring Oromia has experienced significant investment of this sort, as well as relocation programmes. The scale at which villagization and investment overlapped does make Gambella a unique case.

The details of land leases, villagization programmes and government objectives will only be explored in relation to the presented narratives, not as topics in and of themselves. The focus in this analysis is that of understanding narrative and how narrative is used by respective actors. The particular (in)correctness of points made within the

two presented narratives does not necessarily correspond to (in)correctness of conclusions, or present sufficient details to properly contextualize those points. It could be the case that details of the narrative are distorted, yet it results in reliable conclusions, and vice versa. As a result, narratives must be analysed in terms of both the specific points made as well as the general themes and conclusions.

Media reports from Gambella

Information coming out of Gambella is scarce. The region only has one mid-sized city, and has very limited media infrastructure, which means no local newspapers except a government monthly, no television stations and only a small local radio station. However, national radio and television can be received in the region, and the regional Mass Media Agency produces daily television programmes that are broadcast on Ethiopian Television's network in Gambella. Two national news agencies, *Ethiopian News Agency* and *Walta Information Center*, have small regional offices in Gambella. News from Gambella rarely makes headlines except for the occasional official news brief recounting development successes and economic growth in the region. A quantitative study of all news content that was produced by the Ethiopian News Agency in 12 months during 2011 and 2012 found that Gambella was only mentioned 11 times in an entire year of news reports by the national news provider, compellingly demonstrating how marginal the coverage is of the region even in local Ethiopian media (Skjerdal, 2013).

An occasional foreign journalist passes by, but most of what is written and reported about Gambella is based on second-hand accounts. Such is the lack of information about Gambella that when the experienced American journalist Douglas McGill tried to publish a story about a massacre in the area in December 2003 where 424 Anuak were killed, a respected American newspaper rejected the article because they distrusted the incident since no international agency, including the United Nations, appeared to know about it (McGill, Iggers and Cline, 2007). McGill had spoken to local witnesses via mobile telephone, but since there was no professional reporter who could serve as eyewitness, the international media ignored the incident until several months later.

Due to the lack of material out of Gambella, that which does exist becomes all the more important. Thus, the report by HRW, which includes immediate facts and evidence of people who have been involved in the villagization programme, has become a popular source in the international community and the media. To this end, a combined search on the Internet for 'Human Rights Watch' and 'Waiting here for death' reveals that the report is referred to on more than 2000 websites 3 years after the report was published (checked May 2015).

Conditions for human rights advocacy

The relations between international human rights organizations and the Ethiopian government suffer from long-standing tensions. Yearly reports by rights organizations are

routinely scorned by the government. A government spokesperson declares characteristically that, ‘We don’t take orders from Human Rights Watch’ (AFP, 2014). Notwithstanding a relatively less tense period prior to the 2005 elections (Wondwosen, 2009), recent years have witnessed intensified frictions between the state and civil society in Ethiopia (Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009). The introduction of the 2009 Proclamation for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies (popularly called the ‘NGO law’ or ‘CSO law’) is an example of this. Besides demanding all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to register with the government, the law prohibits any NGO working with rights issues to receive more than 10% of its funding from abroad. This has led to serious difficulties for local NGOs, which previously relied heavily on foreign funding, many of which have disappeared as a result (Dupuy et al., 2015).

The debate surrounding the NGO law has exposed a divergence between milieus linked to the international rights advocacy movement (Bader, 2013; Berhanu and Schneider, 2014) and milieus more informed by local discourses (Data, 2012; Dessalegn et al., 2008). A local organization like the Forum for Social Studies (FSS), for example, has earned a right to criticize, while international rights groups like HRW and Amnesty International hardly are welcome on Ethiopian soil. National organizations, like the FSS, are aware of the politically sensitive nature of some subjects and could potentially self-censor what they publish; however, their works also (e.g. Dessalegn, 2013) demonstrate a willingness to critically engage with controversial issues. The rising hostility between the Ethiopian government and international advocacy groups coincides with a growing number of critical reports by rights organizations. As documented by Dupuy et al., (2015), the number of publications (press releases, reports, etc.) each year on Ethiopia by HRW and Amnesty International grew steadily from 0 in 2000 to 20 in 2012. Some of the reports by HRW which have provoked the government greatly in the last few years are ‘Development Without Freedom: How Aid Underwrites Repression in Ethiopia’ (2010) and ‘One Hundred Ways of Putting Pressure: Violations of Freedom of Expression and Association in Ethiopia’ (2010). In response to the latter report, the Office for Government Communication Affairs issued a sharp five-page statement where it called HRW a ‘self-styled watchdog’ posting ‘blanket allegations and downright lies’ (OGCA, 2010). This is all part of the backdrop that informs the current analysis of the diverging narratives of the government and HRW on villagization in Gambella.

Theory and method

The study makes use of narrative theory, which investigates how narrative structure affects perception. Narrative is powerful. Stories can be utilized and promoted in ways that contain direct and indirect bias, and they may speak volumes about the way in which the objects within the narrative are understood. For example, discussing historic accounts of the drought that struck the Great Plains in North America in the

1930s, Cronon (1992) compared two narratives that utilized largely the same data and derived entirely different conclusions from it. What he found interesting is not the conclusions or their validity, but the way in which the shared information was embedded in narrative, implying that the conclusion drives the way in which information is understood and presented, thus affecting the way in which narrative manifests itself. Details of a narrative may be emphasized, or excluded, in order to present an ideal and romanticized version (Toolan, 2001).

The method used in this research is narrative analysis. By means of a scrutiny of selected phrases, descriptions and points of view, the analysis seeks to pinpoint the tensions between the two diverging narratives. The focus is the key themes that shape the respective narratives. Emphasis is placed on the differences that exist within the two analysed narratives. The respective data that constitute the two narratives as research objects are somewhat different. For the narrative of HRW, the analysis rests on the mentioned report (2012). For the narrative of the Government of Ethiopia, as there is no equivalent report, the researchers rely on a combined body of material that expresses the government's portrayal of the villagization programme. The material is purposively sampled from reports distributed by the official news provider, the Ethiopian News Agency (www.ena.gov.et), and other government-friendly news sites. Specific search terms were used to identify relevant articles in the period of 2010–2014. Although the material is somewhat unequal in size (the number of pages in the HRW report exceeds the number of pages collected for the government's narrative), the data material is in each case deemed sufficient to identify predispositions for each of the narratives.

Analysis of the two narratives

The two voices selected for analysis are prominent in the contested context. The report by HRW from 2012 is the most detailed report on Gambella villagization available to date. Examples of others that are aligned with the position advocated therein include the Oakland Institute (2013) and advocacy work done by the ASO. The latter organization is based in the UK and is one of the main sources of non-governmental information used in reports, including those published by the Oakland Institute, which are cited by many, including HRW. The second narrative is a collection of public relations pieces from the Government of Ethiopia, some of which are specific to Gambella and others relate to the investment-villagization question broadly.

HRW: 'waiting here for death'

HRW is an organization that seeks to defend the rights of all people, doing so through investigative research and advocacy. Although the headquarters of HRW are located in the USA, the organization works globally. HRW seeks to expose injustice and human rights abuses in diverse areas such as migrant workers in Kuwait (2010), terrorism

prosecutions in the USA (2014), and resettlement programmes in Ethiopia (2012), to mention but a few examples. HRW's chief methodological tool is the personal interview, from which generalized conclusions are drawn. One challenge, as the case in Gambella suggests, is that a limited number of interviews makes it hard to draw general conclusions about an entire region or country. However, identifying isolated cases of injustice attracts far less media attention when compared to exposure of systematic and widespread injustice. The implicit objective of HRW is to make broad publicity of injustice. Since HRW is not in the business of writing positive reports about human rights protection, it is in an adversarial position when it engages with governments, and this also shapes the way governments view HRW, not as a potential partner but as an opponent.

HRW concludes that the Government of Ethiopia is forcibly relocating tens of thousands into villages in Gambella, without meaningful consultation and without compensation. This process is, according to the report, enforced through intimidation, threats, assaults, arrests and rape. Government-promised services in such villages are inadequate or absent. HRW also believes that the relocation programme serves the purposes of leasing large areas of land for commercial agriculture. The organization calls upon the Government of Ethiopia to make relocations voluntary, consultative and compensated and urges international donors to ensure that they are not supporting the relocations, in their current form directly or indirectly, as they violate human rights.

The report uses the defining term of 'indigenous' for most of the people involved in the villagization programme in Gambella. Although the term is not explicitly defined by HRW, it connects readers to an international movement of marginalized people (Kenrick and Lewis, 2004). The linguistic, and common, use of the term relates largely to origin of place and historical ties. Added to that is cultural distinctiveness, although that component of 'indigeneity' cannot be a singular definition, as almost all ethnic groups in Ethiopia could make the claim, so the origin of place and historical ties have continued to be prominent in defining indigenous. In addition, such groups tend to be marginalized by other politically dominant groups. The term is problematic in the Ethiopian context for several reasons. For example, determining what constitutes cultural distinctiveness, particularly in a country where over eighty languages are spoken and a similar number of ethnic groups exist, is difficult. All but four of those ethnic groups represent less than 5 per cent of the population. Further complicating this definition is that two of the four largest ethnic groups have experienced significant historical discrimination and marginalization (Oromo and Somali). Defining indigenous in Ethiopia could, arguably, include everyone, based upon the use of historical and cultural information.

In the specific case of Gambella, the term runs into additional complications. The Nuer, one of the two largest ethnic groups in Gambella, moved into the region during the nineteenth century, which does not fit in with the most common determining factor of 'indigenous'. Livelihood type has been suggested by the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Co-ordinating Committee (IPACC) as an important factor in determining

‘indigenous’ in Africa, rather than origin to a particular area. The IPACC speaks of the ‘dominance of agricultural peoples’ in this regard (IPACC, 2013). This too, poses challenges, as a significant number of Anuak are not nomadic or pastoral, but agriculturalists. Marginalization is another factor, although not a primary one, utilized in the common use of the term as well as that suggested by IPACC. The Nuer, along with the Anuak, have the largest ‘relative political power’ (HRW, 2012, p. 16) in Gambella, although these ethnicities do not have such on the national level. However, these are only two of the largest ethnicities present in Gambella.

The point here is not to state that a certain group is or is not indigenous, rather that the term is ambiguous, but has nonetheless been utilized, and emphasized, by HRW. This is not to suggest that ethnicity is irrelevant in Ethiopia at either the federal or regional-state levels. What this article draws attention to is the potential difference in the discourse of ethnic self-determination in Ethiopia and the international discourse around indigeneity. Despite some bodies, such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (2006), identifying groups in Gambella as ‘indigenous’, there has been little traction within Ethiopia as an agreed-upon definition hardly exists, and it is clear that such a definition may be practically impossible to arrive at in the Ethiopian context. When the UN adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2007, Ethiopia was absent during the vote. Shortly thereafter, the African Union (based in Ethiopia) said that it could not adopt the Declaration as is, one of the main concerns being the defining of indigenous peoples (UNHCHR, 2007). While primary in the narrative of HRW, terminology that links it with international advocacy and international law, this use has limited legal traction within the national context as the Government of Ethiopia has not adopted the international rights convention regarding the rights of indigenous people and has raised a number of concerns regarding it. While Ethiopia has enabled regional-states to make local adaptations with ‘adequate power’, such as the language of education, the constitution upholds the primary role of the Federal government to ‘formulate and implement the country’s policies, strategies and plan in respect of overall economic, social and development matters’ as well as the utilization of land and other natural resources (Article 51; GoE, 2014). This is not to suggest that the legal discourse around indigeneity is not a debate that Ethiopia ought to have, rather it is to demonstrate that the two narratives are utilizing different frameworks in order to build their respective viewpoint.

HRW’s report begins with Ethiopia’s ‘long and brutal history of failed attempts at resettling millions of people in collectivized villages’ (p. 4), and outlines the past failure of the Derg regime’s resettlement efforts. It is implied that villagization has continued ‘under the current government’ (p. 11). To support claims of continuity, Abbink (2012) suggests that there is an ideological consistency between the resettlement programmes during the Derg regime and their current manifestation. Additionally, the stated objectives of the programmes run by both the Derg and the EPRDP governments are extraordinarily similar (HRW, 2012; Library of Congress, 1991). However, the differences between villagization and resettlement programmes of the past and the present should

not be dismissed. These differences are not only programmatic, but also relate to the political reasons for implementing these programmes as well as the outcomes, as described above. A political perspective of villagization and resettlement implies that the implementation of these programmes is not solely ideological, and is significantly influenced by external factors, which shapes where, when and why villagization and resettlement occurs. Even if the objectives, and potentially an inherited statist-turned-developmental ideology (Abbink, 2012) are aligned, the diverging nature of the two governments and their political objectives, their respective implementation of these programmes as well as the context influencing them necessitates that criticisms also draw attention to prevailing differences. In the case of the HRW report, although more than a decade had passed since the reinstatement of villagization, the '[t]ensions' that culminated 'on December 13, 2003' (p. 14) suggest that the programmes are more linked – in time, place and approach – than they actually are. The period of high tension that is glossed over includes a revolution that brought to power a new government, a complete halting of villagization programmes and the passing of nearly a decade and a half. That is not to suggest human rights violations ended in Gambella, but an important chain of events and significant period of time is neglected and presented as a continuous tension. The current government did not conduct villagization programmes between 1991 and 2004, and not in Gambella until 2010. The report also does not distinguish the past inter-regional relocation with the current intra-regional programme.

HRW describes the food security situation in Gambella as 'precarious' (2012, p.15), the people 'malnourished' (2012, p. 46) with low levels of crop productivity (2012, p. 16), while also 'richly endowed with high quality soils' (2012, p. 15), having 'abundant water supplies' and 'widespread forest cover' (2012, p. 15). These descriptions are not necessarily contradictory, and in many ways are similar to those of the Government of Ethiopia; a rich culture and tradition exists within contexts of underutilized potential and human suffering. The government, on the other hand, presents different information, which focuses upon low levels of access to education and health care and high levels of disease burdens.

HRW describes the process of moving people as coerced and violent. The Minister of Federal Affairs stated that people are free to return to their original lands, as a counter narrative, which was confirmed for some communities by HRW (2012, p. 29). The land from which people are being moved is being sold with 'no advance notice' (2012, p. 18) and leased to investors 'in the areas where villagization is happening' (2012, p. 54). At the same time, however, HRW states that 'there is no precise information or mapping available on where land investments have been awarded' (2012, p. 54). Although HRW maps detailed changes of households, they do not indicate the geographical relationship between household locations and the large investments, which include large canal systems that could be located using the same technology.

HRW states that 'agricultural investment in Ethiopia is focused on the regions of Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Afar and Somali – the same regions where

villagization programmes are being undertaken' (2012, p. 55). Neglected by HRW are other regions that have received significant amounts of investment, including Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' (SNNP) regions (Bossio et al., 2012; Keeley et al., 2014). Other analyses, for example, those relating to neighbouring regional-state SNNP, provide additional insights into the relationship between investment and relocation (e.g. Hurd, 2013). At the same time, HRW pays no attention to resettlement in areas wherein investment has not occurred, or where resettlement occurred before large-scale investment took place, or where the outcomes of resettlement have been positive (e.g. Kassa, 2015; Dessalegn et al., 2013; Gill, 2010; Messay, 2009; Misganaw, 2005). The latter studies might have been omitted as it could lead one to question the villagization=investment equation, and more broadly relocation=investment. HRW did speak with concerned international donors, who completed assessments and found the process to be voluntary (2012, p. 63), which included USAID, UNICEF, DFID, the World Bank and the Embassy of Finland. HRW and the Government of Ethiopia agreed that the services promised to those who were relocated were inadequate.

Government of Ethiopia: 'This land is not used by anybody'

Meles Zenawi, past Prime Minister of Ethiopia, stated that investors need not worry about baseless and misplaced talk about land grabs in the country; 'there is no land grab and there will be no land grab', he stated (Chand, 2011, p. 1). Ethiopia's Ambassador to the UK, Berhanu Kebede (2011), responded to accusations about land leases in a *Guardian* article. Therein, he claims that the main driving force behind governmental decisions is ensuring household and national food self-sufficiency, which is also highlighted in the Gambella Villagization Action Plan (a copy was obtained by HRW and included in the 2012 report). Ambassador Berhanu suggests that the 'phrase "land grab" implies wealthy foreign investors are misappropriating land and that Ethiopia has no control over the process . . . Ethiopia chooses to allocate land' (2011, p. 1). A representative from the Embassy of Ethiopia in India stated that there is 'no evacuation or dislocation of people' with regard to land leasing (Chandrasekaran and Padmanabhan, 2011). Analyses of 'land grabs', the role of investors and debates about land use have been presented by Makki (2012; 2014), Nalepa (2013) and Lavers (2012), whose works can shed additional light on these relationships.

The government narrative describes land as vacant, which is, at best, only partially correct. Semi-nomadic and nomadic pastoralists would use land on an infrequent or seasonal basis, while shifting cultivators would leave a portion of land for a duration of years, and later return to it. Meles Zenawi described the land available for lease as 'three million hectares of unutilized land' that is 'not used by anybody' (Chand, 2011). Metasebia Tadesse, Minister Counsellor at the Ethiopian Embassy in New Delhi, depicts the land as 'barren' and 'completely uninhabited' (Chandrasekaran and Padmanabhan, 2011). Ambassador Berhanu describes the land in a slightly more

precise way, as ‘not currently under cultivation’ (2011, p. 1). The last of these statements would leave room to include non-agricultural use of the land, such as pastoralism, as still be technically correct. HRW asserts that land, ‘essential to livelihoods such as grazing areas, forests, and fields for shifting agriculture have been taken from the local populations’ (2012, p. 4). Regardless if that land was taken for the purpose of leasing it to investors, or for the government-stated purpose of relocating people into villages so as to provide social services, it is clear that the use and control of that land has significantly changed.

HRW suggests that the government has multiple purposes, or at least multiple stated purposes, for the villagization programme. It appears that the Government of Ethiopia views these as complementary rather than contradictory. Improving agricultural production, food sufficiency, and access to basic socio-economic services as well as the prevention of hazards, such as flooding, are spoken about as mutually occurring as a result of villagization. Stated purposes differ in time, place and speaker, but the above-stated reasons tend to be consistent within those variations. One important difference suggested by HRW (2012) is that villagization is done to clear up land for the sake of investors. However, relocation has occurred throughout the country, most of which is not near areas of large-scale foreign investment. Cases in point are relocations that took place in Amhara, Oromia and Tigray involving 200,000 individuals and largely occurring before most of the large-scale foreign investments took place (Dessalegn et al., 2013). That does not mean, however, that the villagization processes in Gambella are unrelated to investment.

The size of land available for lease differs greatly in the narratives of the Government of Ethiopia versus HRW. The government reports that three million hectares of land are available for lease, while around 300,000 had actually been leased, as of 2011 (Berhanu, 2011). HRW (2012) claims that 3.6 million hectares have been leased. According to various accounts, large-scale foreign land acquisitions in Gambella (above 5000 hectares) are significantly less than the figure reported by HRW (Cotula et al., 2009; Deininger, 2011; Land Matrix, 2014). Although the Government of Ethiopia posts land-lease contracts online, there is much debate about the extent of land leases, with the figures reported by HRW on the higher end of that spectrum. Some research indicates that many land leases have never been operational (Bues and Theesfeld, 2012) and the government has begun cancelling contracts, along with implementing new regulations and limitations for leasing land (Africa Intelligence, 2013).

The government claims that the villagization programme has proven to be a success. Four years after the launch of the programme, the Federal Special Support Board reports that households who have relocated in fertile areas now benefit from ‘basic services such as health, education, clean water and roads’ (Abera, 2014). Furthermore, they have apparently started to use modern technologies which helps to improve productivity. The media reports that carry this information come from the Ethiopian News Agency, the government’s own news carrier. The report is put in a development frame where the focus is on poverty reduction and modernization. However, a Gambella State

Chief who is interviewed by the news agency acknowledges that there are also some problems with the villagization programme related to ‘quality service provision in some social and economic institutions’ (Abera, 2014). What exactly these problems are is not specified. Overall, the news agency’s portrayal of the programme is one that unequivocally praises the efforts to change lives in Gambella for the better.

The government version of the successes of villagization is contrasted by a report by *The Guardian* (UK), with one of its reporters having visited Gambella in April 2014. The reporter met locals who claim that the government has not delivered on services such as clean water and health clinics (Davison, 2014). In fact, the newspaper found that some families have started to move back to where they came from. Apparently, the government has not been able to provide the funds necessary to improve public services. However, *The Guardian*’s report at the same time gives an impression that families have moved voluntarily, contrasting Human Right Watch’s claim of ‘forced displacement’. These third-party reports complicate both narratives, in different ways.

HRW (2012) claims that the Government of Ethiopia, in seeking to provide needed services to communities in Gambella, did not plan to build sufficient services to meet the needs of the planned relocation villages. The organization suggests that while school buildings and health posts are there, they are not adequately staffed or utilized. However, the HRW criticism does not mention existing infrastructure, nor does it take into account geospatial factors. It is unclear how far apart the planned villages are from each other and to what extent new infrastructure is actually required, and whether the proposed 19 new primary schools and 22 new health posts will provide sufficient geospatial service coverage. Despite the obvious lack of details, each of the two parties – HRW and the government – draws compelling conclusions on this issue which support their own attitude towards the villagization programme. Minister Shiferaw Teklemariam claims that the Donor Assistance Group found the services to be functional, although it is unclear what that exactly means, and is challenged by reports from the group itself which finds infrastructure and service provision not to be at the needed level.

Another area of divergence between the Government of Ethiopia and HRW is how this term ‘participatory’ is to be understood. HRW does not define the term itself, but appears to use it to mean participatory planning, assessment, agreement and implementation. The Government of Ethiopia also does not explicitly define what participatory means in this context, but appears to mean agreement and contribution of labour and materials. Williamson (2011) and Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003) have explored the meaning of participation in the context of the Ethiopian government, although in different development contexts. With such divergent uses of the term, the narrative and expectations of what participation ought to look like result in significant discrepancies between the two. For example, HRW takes great issue with the fact that relocated individuals are required to build their homes in the new sites. The government, however, views this as participatory and a local contribution to the project.

Many able-bodied men, HRW reports, ‘fled into the bush, to South Sudan, or to the UNHCR refugee camps in Kenya, leaving women, children, the sick, and the elderly

behind' (2012, p. 27). The government responded to HRW that if there were refugees caused by the villagization process, then UNHCR would have a report stating such. Despite interviewing fifty people in the camp from Gambella, HRW does not provide any data from UNHCR on cited reasons for fleeing into the camps. This question becomes particularly interesting when HRW found an increase of arrivals in Dadaab refugee camp in eastern Kenya near the Somali border, which is much further away from Gambella than Kakuma refugee camp located in north-western Kenya. Many interviewees in the HRW report mention fleeing to South Sudan, which makes Kakuma refugee camp an even more likely destination than Dadaab refugee camp. HRW does not explore this question, nor does it check data at Kakuma refugee camp or seek clarification from UNHCR on official reasons for entry by the new arrivals from Gambella.

Most violations of human rights cited by HRW come from reports of refugees in Kenya (HRW, 2012). Refugee claims are complicated matters. The basis of such claims relies upon personal testimony and are often difficult to corroborate (Kegan, 2003). It has earlier been argued how Ethiopians going into 'exile' have combined motives for seeking refugee status (Skjerdal, 2010). A range of methods are known to be used in the process. Ethiopians, for example, will pay an official in the country for a falsified arrest warrant based on political grounds, relocate as a refugee to a neighbouring country and then have family or friends sponsor them from abroad.¹ In this way, refugees do not need to be selected by UNHCR, but can be sponsored, once given refugee status. Refugees elsewhere have expressed similar ideas and have expressed their detailed understanding of what does, and does not constitute grounds for consideration of gaining refugee status and being considered for international relocation (Cochrane, 2007). It is not suggested that the experiences of those in the refugee camp are not truthful; rather, it ought to be supported with interview data from within Gambella. Although not highlighted in the main text of HRW's report, the footnotes indicate that the worst experiences were voiced by those in the refugee camp, with only a limited number voiced from the interviews held inside Ethiopia. There may be other complicating factors, such as fear of repercussions. What is clear is that local data are missing, making it hard to comprehensively understand the ideas and opinions of those involved in the programmes.

The government claims that reports of intimidation, threats, assaults, arrests and rape are untrue. In support of this, they say that the villagization programme was widely accepted in Gambella, and the first year target of 15,000 households was surpassed, with over 20,000 households relocating. Exact figures were provided by the

¹This is a method which is well known among immigration authorities in Europe and North America. The archives of the Norwegian Immigration Appeals Board, for example, give details about various cases where Ethiopian asylum seekers used falsified arrest warrants to enhance their chances of getting political asylum (www.une.no, cf. U.S. Department of State, 2008).

Government of Ethiopia to HRW (2012), which indicated that 20,243 households were relocated in the first year of the programme.

Concluding discussion

The study shows that the narratives of HRW and the Ethiopian government are vastly different, both in their description of reality and in their *raison d'être*. Four traits of the 2012 report by HRW were highlighted as being key themes in shaping the narrative, particularly as they differed with the narrative as presented by the Government of Ethiopia. One is the use of the term 'indigenous', which is highly important to the argumentation of the rights organization. Used approximately 100 times in the HRW report, the term 'indigenous' portrays the peoples of Gambella as being threatened by the central authority, with implicit linkages to colonialism or colonial-style activity. Secondly, the report engages in selective reading of history when juxtaposing current villagization in Gambella with Ethiopia's 'long and brutal history' (HRW, 2012, p. 4) and insufficiently takes into account non-investor land right conflicts. Fundamental differences between relocation during the Derg and today are glossed over. Thirdly, statistical data are used strategically to argue that rural people are pushed off their land. Lastly, HRW relies heavily upon the stories of refugees living in Kenya as first-hand testimony of the apparent human rights violations taking place in Ethiopia. Thus, the subtitle of the report, 'Forced displacement', appears to be a factual statement, although it is based on the view of selective voices and contradicts the findings of various international donors. To this end, it is interesting to note that HRW has not arrived at a consistent subtitle of the report; while the inside pages read 'forced displacement', the cover page keeps it as 'displacement' only.

The Ethiopian government, on the other hand, comes out as reactive rather than proactive in its communication. The government's narrative is largely a result of reactions by Ethiopian leaders and officials in response to claims posed by rights organizations and journalists. Worthy of note, however, is that the reactive nature of its communications existed before the publication of the HRW report in 2012 (e.g. Chandrasekaran and Padmanabhan, 2011; Berhanu, 2011; Chand, 2011). To HRW and to others, the government has responded, for example, by declaring that relocation is fully voluntarily and unrelated to investor interests. The complementary approach of the Ethiopian government, assuming multiple reasons for the villagization programme, appears to the international public as a cover for what is really happening on the ground. The government does not reflect about the role of indirect pressure with regard to relocation by the government, or the potential of abuses taking place, despite evidence to the contrary. Furthermore, the government (re)defines participation as non-objection. Importantly, the narratives of unused land appear, at best, strategically worded to avoid the potential implications of seasonal, pastoral or shifting cultivator uses of the land in question. Much of the government narrative, beyond planning documents, comes out as a 'forced' counter narrative in response to that of HRW.

There is perhaps truth in both narratives, depending on which aspect one chooses to focus upon, and to what extent one reads the letter or the spirit of the narratives. However, this study presents a challenge to the actors involved in producing the narratives, and particularly points to the role of rights organizations since that has been especially emphasized in the article. As seen in the study, information from the report of HRW is widely shared in the international community and emerges as reliable documentation on the issue. At the same time, several aspects of the report are in need of more profound discussion, such as the rhetorical use of the term 'indigenous' and the selective portrayal of recent Ethiopian history. When excerpts from the report are reproduced by international actors, the information risks becoming even more one-sided and politicized than in the report itself. This, in turn, further distances the important concerns that are raised from policy-makers, and may even be counterproductive as the government dismisses the work entirely. The call, therefore, is for actors such as human rights organizations to acknowledge that the writing of narrative takes not only courage but also induces a lot of responsibility, especially when it seeks to communicate with several audiences at the same time. The call for greater precision and contextualization applies equally to the Government of Ethiopia, as these issues are increasingly a domestic concern, including within national media and within national organizations. The result of less polarizing and more comprehensive narratives, for international organizations as well as the Government of Ethiopia, is a more constructive dialogue that positively contributes to policy-making as well as national cohesion, the latter of which is an issue of particular concern for the government and a reason why this shift is important for the Government of Ethiopia as well as national and international organizations.

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Note: Ethiopian authors are listed according to local naming tradition, i.e. by first name instead of surname.

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