When Large-Scale Land Acquisition Meets Local Conflict: Experiences from Gambela Regional State, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study examines the arrival of the (trans)national investment companies in Gambela Regional State of Ethiopia where the Anyuaa and Nuer ethnic groups struggle over land and natural resources. The study aimed to explore the implication of the convergence of the large-scale land acquisition and resource based local conflict towards the local community in the region. A qualitative research approach was taken to carry out the study. Accordingly, findings from in-depth qualitative interviews, focus group discussions and key informant interviews show that the (trans)national investment companies contributed for the escalation of the conflict in the region. The arrival of the (trams)national companies, through the country's pro-large-scale investment policy, in the region where land has been contested by groups organized along ethnic fault-lines, created the competition and struggle over land increasing the number of competitors on the same land. The study concludes that the nexus between the large-scale land transfer and resource based conflict in the region resulted de-peasntization and proletariansation of the rural poor in the region. Therefore, apposite land policy and governance is needed since such policy and governance not only contributes for sustainable development and manage the conflict but also helps to empower the rural poor beyond its role to redress the damage done.

Keywords: Anyuaa; Ethiopia; Gambela; Large-scale land acquisition; Local conflict; Nuer

Introduction

The contemporary large-scale land acquisition is guided by the neoclassicals' promises of economic efficiency that commodifies land. Such acquisition "affect various social groups in a variety of ways, provoking differentiated political reactions that have multiple, and often contradictory, dynamics in terms of class, ethnicity, gender and generation" (Borras, 2016, p. 10). Happening in areas where conflict over land and natural resources between groups organized along ethnic identities exist, such acquisition exacerbates the pre-existing conflict (Burnod et al., 2013; Meckelburg, 2014).

The 21st century Africa, where not only "poor and food insecure countries" (Rahmato, 2011, p. 2) are found but also a place where "the most gruesome ethnic wars are found" (Sadowski, 1998, p. 20),

marks a place where violent conflict over land and natural resources meets more than 41% of the world's documented large-scale land deals (ActionAid International, 2014).

Although the rural Ethiopian poor didn't benefit from the land reforms in the past for the reforms were meant to control political power instead of bringing meaningful changes in the countryside as land reforms aimed "to calm social unrest and allay political pressures by peasant organizations", (trans)national corporations were not given agricultural land (Deininger, 1999, p. 6). However, the incumbent government has been making land available for the (trans)national investment companies (Moreda, 2015). Driven by the country's pro-capitalist investment policy that leases land to the (trans)national companies, the (trans)national companies – being a new actor – arrived in the region where resource based sporadic local conflict between the Anyuaa and Nuer ethnic groups exist in Gambela Regional State of Ethiopia. The region is marked by a place where the (trans)national investment companies meet resource based conflict between the Anyuaa and the Nuer ethnic groups – implying an emerging nexus of conflict in the region.

The Anyuaa is a settled agrarian community known for its cultivation of land while the Nuer is historically pastoralists dominantly known for their cattle in the region (Gebeyehu, 2013). Both of the ethnic groups have been affected by the arrival of the state backed (trans)national investment companies – hungry for land and water. The companies, which their presence is deemed essential by the government and backed by the state's investment policy that hugely favours large-scale mechanized agriculture, arrived in the context where the conflict over land and natural resources found between these two ethnic groups (Meckelburg, 2014). The government, overlooking the old ways of living and communal land holding system of these groups, is leasing the land to the companies. The arrival of the companies to the villages puts the locals under a complex problem where their lives and livelihoods are threatened.

Although these ethnic groups live in one of the regions where conflict between them meets the highest number of (trans)national companies that managed to seize huge portion of land (Rahmato, 2011), the problem didn't get sufficient attention. Studies conducted so far tend to be reductionist. While some emphasize the conflict between the two ethnic groups, the rest emphasize the large-scale land transfer overlooking the conflict dimension. Studies that focus on the pre-existing conflict between the Anyuaa and the Nuer vis-à-vis the arrival of the (trans)national corporations in this region are almost non-existent.

The study is delimited to Gambela Regional State (GRS) where the Anyuaa and the Nuer ethnic groups reside. The region is located at the south-western part of the country. It is some 700 km far from the capital – Addis Ababa, close to the Sothern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State in the south, southeast and east; and shares the common border with Sudan in the north and northwest, with South Sudan in the southwest, and close to Oromia Regional State in the north, northeast and east; and Benishangul Regional State in the north. The region, according to the 2007 censes, is generally said to be home to five indigenous ethnic groups: Anyuaa, Nuer, Majangir, Opo and Komo. It has quite a sparse population, since 2007 census showed the region had at that time a total population of 307,096 (159, 787 men and 147, 309 women) (Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia, 2007).

The Anyuaa and the Nuer constitute a significant portion of the population of the region, being estimated at 21% and 47% respectively according to the 2007 census (Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia, 2007). The Nuer and the Anyuaa are the majority having 64,473 and 44,581 in 1994 and 143, 286 and 64, 984 in 2007 respectively. Besides their economic dependence on land, which continues today, the land also constitutes the social, cultural, and spiritual life of the locals making the survival of these ethnic groups "intrinsically linked to the survival of their territories, most importantly land and land-related resources" across the region (Adeto and Abate, 2014, p. 167). The study tried to answer the question 'how does arrival of (trans)national investment companies exacerbate the pre-existing resource conflict between the Anyuaa and the Nuer?' In so doing, it seeks to uncover the link between the large-

scale land acquisition and the pre-existing sporadic conflict between the Anyuaa and the Nuer over land and natural resources in GRS.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was taken to examine the nexus. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used in the study. The primary data were collected from in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGD), and key informant interviews. The secondary data used includes: books, journal articles, government policy documents, conference papers, and Nongovernmental organizations (NGO) reports.

In-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and key informant interviews were used to collect primary data. Interview, which "provides rich, in-depth qualitative data" (O'Leary, 2014, p. 217), with 23 participants drawn using a snowball sampling method in four districts – *Gambela Zuria, Gambela Town (the capital of the region), Itang and Gogg* districts – with selected members of both ethnic groups were held. Interview questions were semi-structured since this enables "to come away with all the data" that the researcher wanted to get (O'Leary, 2014, p. 218). Aiming "to draw out depth of opinion that might not arise from direct questioning" (O'Leary, 2014, p. 218), two FGDs with Jimma University summer students of the Anyuaa indigenous community that involved five participants and the Nuer ethnic group that involved nine participants were conducted. Furthermore, two key informant interviews with two purposefully selected higher officials of the Regional State were also made.

The collected data was carefully transcribed. After the transcribed data was coded and triangulated to generate the main findings of the study, themes were developed based on the codes. Finally, the data was analyzed using critical interpretative method. During the entire process of conducting this study, the necessary research ethical procedures and safety measures were respected and implemented.

Land Politics in the 21st Century Governance Arrangement

With the advent of capitalism, which promotes individual wellbeing – "class analysis generally and peasant wars more specifically, ceased to be fashionable topics in academic circles" (Buijtenhuijs as cited in Cramer, 2011, p. 278). Overlooking the agrarian roots of violent conflict and delinking capitalism from conflict, "social scientists have tended to see the underlying motivation for wars in developing countries in terms of ethnic chauvinism or individual pecuniary gain" (Cramer, 2011, p. 278). It is therefore important to note "the classic agrarian question of how agriculture is influenced by the capitalist economy has been reformulated multiple times" (Peluso and Lund, 2011, p. 668) while dealing with the rural dwellers since "those most threatened are poor rural people – including ethnic minorities, indigenous people, pastoralists and peasants" (Moreda, 2016, p. 2).

The upshot of the New Institutional Economics (NIE) in changing rural structures, social relations and livelihoods of the rural poor needs to be examined since "understanding agrarian change in the modern world centers on the analysis of capitalism and its development" (Bernstein, 2010, p. 1). Capitalism, which goes "hand in hand" with conflict (Oya, 2013, 1536), "disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and earth" (Schneider and McMichael, 2010, p. 463). Promoting large-scale mechanized agriculture, which results destruction and scarcity of land in areas where pre-existing sporadic conflict over such resources exist, capitalism aggravates the conflict (Baglioni and Gibbon, 2013; Burnod et al., 2013; Meckelburg, 2014). Unpacking capitalism – "a system of production and reproduction based in a fundamental social relation between capital and labor" – helps to understand the role capitalism plays in aggravating pre-existing conflict (Bernstein, 2010, p. 1). Thus, using Agrarian

Political Economy as a lens to examine the role capitalism plays in the convergence of the large-scale land deals and conflict in GRS in the context of "the agrarian roots and dynamics of violent conflicts" is important for "much recent and ongoing violent conflict has roots in, and is shaped by, agrarian structures, relations and change" (Cramer, 2011, p. 278).

The rural agricultural land in the countries in the global South is believed to host "nearly half of the world's population" (Borras, 2016, p. 3). This shows the significance of the Agrarian Political Economy's approach "in agrarian studies that stress the importance of understanding dynamics of agrarian transformation brought about by capitalism's penetration of the countryside" (Borras, 2016, p. 8). The arrival of (trans)national corporations "in poor and food insecure countries" in the global South (Rahmato, 2011, p. 2), where "the most gruesome ethnic wars are found" (Sadowski, 1998, p. 20), aggravates the pre-existing conflict between the rural poor communities (Borras, 2016, p. 10). This happens not only because "capitalism and conflict go hand in hand" (Oya, 2013, p. 1536) but also "processes of agrarian structural change are themselves inherently conflictual and frequently violent" (Cramer, 2011, p. 278).

Moreover, capitalism creates constant struggle and competition between or among groups divided along different fault-lines over land and natural resources (Sandler, 2000) that are "in absolute limited supply, constrained by available areas" (Derman et al. as cited in Rutten and Mwangi, 2014, p. 55) since individuals in each group are entirely dependent on land and the natural resources for survival.

The 21st century is marked by the emergence of global governance where nation-states cease to be a sole and sovereign actor over issues that are pertinent to their respective citizens even within their own territory. There are multilayers of actors ranging from the supranational to the village level resulting the shift from government to governance – "the flow of authority away from the nation-state to international institutions on the one hand, and to non-state actors on the other" (German, 2014, p. 222). Such governance, therefore, "is not the domain of supra-national organizations alone" (Sikor et al., 2013, p. 522) since it brought the involvement of supranational organizations, governments, local actors and non-state actors particularly in the countries in the global South (Borras and Franco, 2009; Moreda and Spoor, 2015).

This shift, paving the way for the (trans)national companies to get access to the resources of poor countries in the global South, is threatening the lives and livelihoods of indigenous rural dwellers (Moreda, 2016) that constitutes "three-fourths of the world's poor" (Borras and Franco, 2009, p. 9). They are affected by "the highly uneven and varied outcomes of globalization, decentralization and privatization policies" that are at the very heart of the precepts of capitalism (Borras and Franco, 2009, p. 9). Moreover, this shift not only "assume[s] a global dimension, contributing to the intensified competition over land" (Sikor et al., 2013, p. 523) but also "facilitated and responded to radical revalorizations of land, together driving the intensified competition and struggles over land" intensifying the pre-existing tensions and violent conflict (Sikor et al., 2013, p. 522).

This governance arrangement enabled the supranational organizations and economically strong countries to affect the policy makings of countries in the global South. This results a "greater degree of influence . . . in (re)shaping the nature, content, pace, direction and perspective of national land policies" of these states (Borras and Franco, 2009, p. 16). Thus, "conventional land reform disappeared from official policy agendas" and replaced by the neoliberal market oriented land reform policy that commodifies land and natural resources (Borras, 2016, p. 3). Countries in the South are hugely dependent on the supranational organizations since these states need aid from these organizations which "control large funding" (Borras and Franco, 2009, p. 16). These countries forced to compromise and adopt their policies to conform to the mainstream development discourse that these organizations promote. This lead "land property rights formalization projects, land registration and titling, land administration, and market-

led land reforms" (Borras and Franco, 2009, p. 16) to dictate the policies of these countries towards "a new type of negotiated land reform that relies on voluntary land transfers based on negotiation between buyers and sellers" (Deininger, 1999, p. 3).

Moreover, the neoliberal precepts of "efficient use and allocation of land resources" (Borras and Franco 2009, 16) introduced into the policies of these countries. Parallel to their claim for efficiency, the neoliberals drew strategies that enable them control resources in countries in the South deeming the indigenous way of shifting cultivation and fishing inefficient. These countries are forced to further introduce the neoliberal precepts of "making land markets more transparent and fluid"; "focusing on productive projects"; "decentralizing implementation"; and, "maximizing private sector involvement" (Deininger, 1999, p. 29-31) into their national land policies. As a result, land governance is set to a 'flow centered' arrangements – "governance that targets particular flows of resources or goods" (Sikor et al., 2013, p. 522) – to meet their objective of land control. This new form of capitalist land control – "practices that fix or consolidate forms of access, claiming, and exclusion for some time" – results in the shift of land ownership (Peluso and Lund, 2011, p. 668). With the shift of ownership of land, "land use tends to shift from multiple, overlapping local uses—farming, herding, foraging—to monoculture" (Cotula, 2013, p. 1610) resulting the alienation of the peasants from their land and creating de-peasantization and proletarianization.

State-Society Relations in the Process and Access to Land

Being a "complex and differentiated actor with internal inconsistency in its agenda and practice at different levels" (Moreda, 2016, p. 3), state plays key roles in the access and process of large-scale land acquisition. State is also considered as the arena where the supranational, national and local actors struggle over land and resources beyond the struggle over their administration and governance. Thus, it is important "to unbundle the state, to see government and governance as processes, people and relationships" to understand the role of those actors involved in the process of large-scale land acquisition – land transfer by the state to (trans)national investment companies in the guise of 'marginal land' overlooking the rural dwellers that have been owning the land through traditional land holding system of communal ownership (Wolford et al., 2013, p. 189).

While state has a very active role to play in the process of large-scale land transfer and sweeping power to determine "Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it?" – the classic agrarian questions (Bernstein, 2010, p. 22), "individuals and communities become passive recipients of decisions from above because of the underlying insecurity over their property and the fear of losing it at any time" (Rahmato, 2011, p. 7) for state uses sweeping power in the process of large-scale land transfer (Borras and Franco, 2013, p. 1725; Hall, 2013, p. 1586). The state itself is in struggle and competition with local actors over the process and access (Burnod et al., 2013, p. 358). (Trans)national companies follow both formal institutions and informal mechanisms to access land through state authorities and village chiefs. While state authorities and local chiefs contest with each other to control land, struggle to control resources between or among local actors – local authorities, traditional chefs, and communities divided along different identity fault-lines – also takes place at village levels.

Large-Scale Land Acquisition in Ethiopia and Its Long-Term Implication on the Environment

The Ethiopian government, influenced by the mainstream development discourse, promotes large-scale land investments with the conviction that such investments can transform the country's agriculture through the mechanized farm that such investments introduce. This leads us to interrogate whether large-scale land acquisition is indeed a response to the crises in resource poor rich countries or it

derives from the resource rich poor countries like Ethiopia. This leads us to advance two arguments. First, the claim that large-scale land deals is driven by global food, biofuel, climate crises and unstable commodity prices, increased interest for raw materials etc. is problematic since it failed to take into account the endogenous factors for mechanized farm. Second, large-scale mechanized farm is purely driven by endogenous factors ignoring the exogeneous factors. Hence, both sides of the claim went too far and missed the point. The convergence of the two since 2008 resulted the current intensity and frequency of the large-scale land transfer (Transnational Institute, 2013). The endogenous factors are clearly implicated in the direct intervention of the states through their pro-capitalist land policies and governance, the conducive environment that they are creating to the corporate actors, the attractive incentives and other benefits that they extend to the investors.

Ethiopia's investment policy, which is an offshoot of Article 40/6 of the FDRE's constitution that reads "without prejudice to the right of nations, nationalities, and peoples to own land, government may grant use of land to private investors on the basis of payment arrangements established by law" (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995), is designed in a way that strongly favors large-scale agricultural investment. Intending "to accelerate the economic development of the country and to improve the living standards" of its citizens, the government is leasing vast tracts of land to (trans)national investors (Re-enactment of the Investment Proclamation, 2002). Particularly, vast tracts of land are already transferred in GRS where a sporadic conflict between the Anyuaa and Nuer over land and resources exist. As Meckelburg (2014) wrote, "land has played a decisive role in the various conflicts that have shaken Gambela in the past 100 years" (P. 151)). The investment policy has its own impact on both the Anyuaa and Nuer. As both parties are influenced by the (trans)national companies that the state invites, each of the group create cohesion among themselves to control the available land. This leads to the rise of conflict – the situation where two or more ethnic groups, organized along identity fault-lines, claim the same land and resources – as the groups affected start to claim the same land and resources.

The study shows that the (trans)national companies are taking the land which is covered by forest. Moreover, those companies which start cultivating land are using the main rivers in the region for irrigation. The big irrigation dam that the Saudi Star investment company built on Alwero river – known for its rich and different varieties of fish – in Abobo district is noticeable. The forest not only stabilizes the climate but their fruits, leaves and roots are also used for food and traditional medications by the locals beyond its benefit to build a house and fence. However, investment companies bulldoze the forest after they receive the land. According to the locals, the wide wet areas once covered by the forest is now its forest coverage is declining because of the clearance of the forest. This results shortage of rain in the area. As an in-depth interview participant from Gambela zuria district puts it, "There is a shortage of rain in the villages. Rain do not rain on time as it used to rain. We are affected by the drought. The seeds we saw do not grow" (In-depth Interview participant 2, July 29, 2016). The absence of the rain in turn brought the problem of drought leaving the community in a difficult situation where they struggle to farm the way they used to farm in the past. This leads the community to face shortage of food that extends to famine. During the second FGD, it was revealed that the farming community is affected by this drought and even the seeds they saw do not grow as the heat is mounting.

The clearance of the forest also resulted severe flood from the highland areas of the region threatening the lives and livelihoods of the locals beyond destroying the farm in the lowland areas. While a participant depicted the situation, stated,

> I didn't see such things in the past. It is in recent years that I could be able to see this. Behind our village, there were two ponds. We were getting fish from these ponds. When winter comes, the Baro River becomes full. But these days because of the clearing of the forest, huge flood from the highland areas came and destroyed the ponds. The community couldn't get fish from the ponds as they are affected by the flood. This occurred because of

the clearing of forests by the investors. The flood also destroys our farms in the lowland areas (In-depth Interview participant 8, July 28, 2016).

As it is indicated in the views of a participant above, the farming community living by the riversides is affected and the flood destroys the harvest and many of the water ponds from which the community used to get fish. Threatening their lives and livelihoods, the flood is forcing the agrarian community to abandon their villages and resettle in new areas outside of the river banks. Yet, not all of the community who are living in the river banks that are threatened by the flood are willing to move. There are members of the community who risk their lives for they didn't want to move. According to a participant in Itang, "they [those who are not willing to move] say that 'our ancestors died on the river banks and we cannot move'". This group of people are the one who are unable to detach the socio-cultural and spiritual values of land from their lives and livelihoods (Adeto and Abate, 2014). It implies that the ecological damage that the companies made because of the clearance of the forest also damages the socio-cultural and spiritual values of the land and natural resources for which the rural dwellers risk their lives.

Scarcity of Land and Resources Exacerbating the Conflict

The ecological damages resulted by the companies brought scarcity and depletion of land and natural resources in the region. This leads the locals to intensify their competition for the control of the available land since "in the absence of perceived alternatives, violence and the threat of violence can indeed represent effective ways of controlling or maintaining land access" (Burnod et al., 2013, p. 372). When the (trans)national companies arrive in the situation where the two groups have been struggling for land and natural resources, the situation is worsened since the companies themselves need to control same resources. Such kind of crises, Homer-Dixon (1991) writes, "could ultimately cause the gradual impoverishment of societies. . . which could aggravate class and ethnic cleavages" (P. 78). However, this doesn't mean that it is only scarcity that causes conflict. Both scarcity and abundance may trigger conflict between or among different groups. But, in such areas where pre-existing conflict exist between the two groups and in the context where (trans)national companies involved, it is the scarcity of land that aggravates the conflict between the combatant forces of the Anyuaa and the Nuer.

Before the arrival of the (trans)national companies, the two groups have to deal only with the land issues between them. The Nuer, which used to be dominantly a pastoral community, has been depicted as a community having an ambition to expand its territories towards the land of the Anyuaa – where "nine out of ten international investors have been leased land" (Adeto and Abate, 2014, p. 166) and where "all large-scale agricultural investment areas. . . are concentrated" (Adeto and Abate, 2014, p. 171). But the study shows that, both the Nuer and the Anyuaa are affected by the large-scale land acquisition in the region though the communities in both sides do not see it that way.

Th rise of the 'Gambella Nilotes United Movement'

The ecological damage that created depletion and scarcity of land and natural resources lead to the emergence of the group that labels itself "Gambella Nilotes United Movement/Army (GNUM/A)" (GNUM/A Press Release August 10th, 2012). Furthermore, the scarcity of land and natural resources brought the conflict between the Anyuaa and the Nuer to the virtual world. These clearly indicate the escalation of the sporadic conflict between the two groups.

While the GNUM/A considers itself as a movement that struggles, both diplomatically and through arms, for what it calls 'the rights and dignities' of the Anyuaa including its land and natural

resources, the diaspora based group, which considers itself 'pro-indigenous people' and 'human rights defender', brought the conflict to the virtual world of the internet to fight for what it calls 'the rights of the indigenous community' claiming the same cause that GNUM/A claims. The rise of the armed struggle in the region and the diaspora based struggle through the virtual world of the internet is the result of both the arrival of the (trans)national companies in the area where pre-exiting tensions over land and natural resources exist between the two ethnic groups since such "tensions within local communities over land access and management can thus be exacerbated by large-scale land deals and may erupt into violent land conflicts" (Burnod et al., 2013, p. 359).

There is mounting critique and concerns by the local elders during the arrival of state officials, who are often elected representatives of the locals, in the villages. As an interview respondent from Gogg district stated,

> We inform the authorities about the problem but there is no adequate response from the government. The community discusses the problem among themselves. When the authorities come to the Kebeles the community raises the issue. They take notes on their memo but there is no response after thy return back from the meeting (In-depth Interview participant 17, July 13, 2016).

As it is indicated in the above claim, the local government failed to respond to the concerns of the locals in the region. Such failure to listen to the elders and work to solve the problem contributed to the emergence of 'Gambela Nilotes United Movement/Army'. The movement, which claimed to be established by the members of the Anyuaa community who are aggrieved by the large-scale land acquisition in the region on 10th of August 2011, consists of three groups – (1) the Gambela People Liberation Movement/Force, (2) the Gambela People United Democratic Front and (3) the Southwest Ethiopia Nilo-Saharan Peoples Independent Movement (GNUM/A Press Release August 10th, 2012). The cause of the establishment of this movement, as their document indicates, is the large-scale land transfer to the (trans)national companies. According to the movement, the locals are affected as a result of the large-scale land transfer in the region. Particularly, the movement claims that the agrarian community is experiencing marginalization and alienation in the region. This is indicated in the movement's press release during its first anniversary – August 10th, 2012. The press states that,

> The recent land lease deal signed between the Ethiopian government and the commercial companies and forced displacement without free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous communities have raised great concern among the indigenous people of Gambela and the southwest as whole, i.e. clearing of large forest for agriculture without respect to ecosystem . . . Despite our very rich resources in the whole southwest regions our people (Nilotes) continue to be poor. The depletion of resources including the clearing of huge forest. . . and the increasing cutting of the dense forests have resulted in deforestation, migration of wildlife to the neighbouring countries, loss of communal land rights and the reduction in the level of water in the major rivers throughout the region, with profound advert effect to our livelihood and cultural heritage (GNUM/A Press Release August 10th, 2012, p. 1-2).

Though the government dismisses the movement as "bandits" (Adeto and Abate, 2014, p. 181), the movement claims to choose to use "arm and diplomatic struggle to resist" what it calls "human rights violations" (GNUM/A Press Release, August 10th, 2012, p. 1). It is a movement that considered itself defending the rights of the locals in the region and beyond. The movement is a forceful resistance to defend the land of the indigenous communities that is not limited only to the Anyuaa community and the region. The recurrent and rising conflict between the Anyuaa and Nuer in the region is associated with this group. The violence "which have intensified since the beginning of large-scale agricultural

investment are related to the Anywaa peoples' grievances about their ancestral lands being given to investors, their revered forests being cleared, and their being divested of their communal land rights" (Adeto and Abate, 2014, p. 181).

Fighting in the 'Virtual World'

Despite the armed struggle that GNUM/A engaged in, the conflict is widened as the literate Anyuaa and Nuer brought it to the virtual world of the internet. Particularly, the diaspora based group is the one which is using the internet to voice what it calls the plight of the indigenous community. 'Anywaa Justice Council', 'Anywaa Survival Organization' and 'Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia' are few of the websites that claim to voice this indigenous community's land rights through the virtual world. However, the struggle – both armed and in the virtual world of the internet – for land rights of the indigenous people is also a struggle for political power in the region. The conflict that is occurred, usually in the rural villages, is used as a cause to struggle for political power. This struggle for power goes beyond the mere control of power. It goes with the conviction that the control of political power will provide the access not only to control land and natural resources but also to use the benefits derived from the natural resources on the land. Because of such undemocratic element (of the armed struggle of the group for political power) the government didn't recognize the movement and has never held dialogue though the group claims to have a diplomatic option.

The diaspora based struggle through the virtual world of the internet is not limited to the indigenous peoples' land and natural resources rights in the region. It captures a broader national issue. As Meckelburg (2014) puts it, "here [in the virtual world] the conflict over land is turned into one over the general political future of Ethiopia by various opposition groups" (p. 159). A quick glimpse of the webpages of 'Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia', 'Anywaa Justice Council' and 'Anywaa Survival Organization' shows such broader scope of the struggle. Yet, it is difficult to take the claims of all diaspora based groups for granted as there are groups in the diaspora who want to benefit out of the problem that the locals are facing. The armed struggle and the struggle through the virtual world, which are the result of the arrival of the (trans)national companies, are recent phenomenon – occurring after the arrival of the investment companies in the region.

The 'Majority Rule' at the Centre of the Rising Conflict

The ecological, socio-cultural and economic damages brought by the (trans)national companies, which their presence is badly needed by the state, leads the locals to struggle in the context of young democracy that promotes majority rule further alienates the minority from the land and natural resources. As a democratic system that promotes majority rule in multi-ethnic nations "is likely to be much more conflict-prone" (Stewart, 2008, p. 20), the conflict between the two ethnic groups over the limited land and natural resources escalates and resulted further alienation and marginalization of the land owning agrarian community. Particularly, as the majority has the representation in government offices, it is likely that the interest and rights of the minority will be compromised. As Narag (2012) rightly pointed out, "'government by the majority' usually means government controlled by an ethnic majority" and "the state is unlikely to be wholly neutral in ethnic terms" (p. 2697). Though identities alone unable to cause conflict but "ethnic and other differences between groups can be invoked to form and strengthen collective identities. . . to claim natural resources for one's own group" (Frerks et al., 2014, p. 6). This creates horizontal inequality – occurred because of the asymmetrical distribution of power and resources between groups that are differentiated in terms of identity markers such as race, religion, language – between the Anyuaa and the Nuer (Annan as cited in Østby 2008, p. 143). The horizontal inequality and

resource conflict, occurring in such poor and conflict prone region, escalates the pre-existing conflict and pose challenges to sustainable development and peace.

Though the Anyuaa do not easily abandon its land since the question of land is a question of identity for this community, it is forced to leave its land when the conflict between the two intensified. The community has already abandoned its land and villages found between the districts of Akobo and Itang. A participant from Gambela town stated that "the Nuer say 'this land is ours and we will inherit it. We always go here and there in the forest. When we go to the river the Anyuaa do not allow'". In a way that fits to this desire, the Nuer is criticized for pushing the Anyuaa from the towns and villages in the region. Such claim has its own causes. Partly because of the increasing number of the (trans)national companies which are hungry for land and water and partly because of the sedentary life that is promoted by the government for the pastoral community.

This led the locals to a situation where they are unable to endure the pressure. The cohesion of this community is disrupted because of the fighting and 'artificially' created villages which resulted relocation – which "has almost always disrupted or destroyed prior communities whose cohesion derived mostly from non-state sources" (Scott as cited in Borras 2007, 30) – under the guise of 'providing public services'. This led the agrarian community to de-peasantisation leading the rural poor to survive selling their labor to the (trans)national companies in the region. However, the locals are unable to sell their labor as most investors, whom Adeto and Abate (2014) refer to them as "ghost investors", are not found in the region after they cleared the forest and secured government's loan – available for those (trans)national investors who want to engage in large-scale mechanized agricultural investments (p. 183). This is corroborated by a key informant interview participant who stated,

> Some of them [the (trans)national companies] clear the land and leave it as it is. They use the land to get government loan from the bank. There are companies which abandon the land after they cleared the land and managed to get the loan. This is a challenge for us (key informant interview participant I, August 19, 2016).

These investors used the land as a means to get the loan after clearing the forest to persuade the bank mangers (and other officials) that they have started developing the land. This is implicated in the 15% performance that the (trans)national investment companies have in the region based on the survey made by the government. The investors whose companies are cultivating the land hire few daily laborers from the villagers since the companies use machineries for the large-scale mechanized agriculture. This quash the technological transfer to the rural poor that the government aimed as the companies hire the locals for daily labor. Moreover, the technological transfer is impeded as the majority of the peasants are unable to afford the technological equipment that is found in the large-scale mechanized farm of the (trans)national companies.

Conclusion

The venture to conduct this study was to answer the question 'how does arrival of (trans)national investment companies exacerbate the pre-existing resource conflict between the Anyuaa and the Nuer?' The study shows that the companies, arriving in a region where land and natural resources have been contested by groups differentiated along identities fault-lines, narrowed down the land that both the pastoral and the agrarian communities have been using based on traditional communal ownership. The (trans)national companies resulted depletion and scarcity of land and natural resources and led the two ethnic groups to struggle for the available land often in the riversides where the Anyuaa community settled. Moreover, the pastoral community, which is unable to endure the pressure from the authorities to become a settled community, is forced to push further to the villages of the settled agrarian community.

This escalated the pre-existing resource conflict as the Anyuaa, threatened by the push from the pastoral and the companies, stepped up the fight to defend its ancestral land. The Anyuaa, the community whose lives and livelihoods is disrupted and struggling to cope the pressure from the companies, stepped-up its resistance towards the pastoral community and the companies through the armed struggle of GNUM/A and the virtual world of the internet. The implication of the nexus between the large-scale land transfer and conflict is de-peasntization and massive proletariansation of the rural poor. The move reduced the rural dwellers to the level where they cannot even sell their labor like the proletarians in capitalism. What the locals are facing as the result of the nexus implicates the harshness of capitalism that accelerates the elimination of the peasants from their land.

As most of the violent conflict observed particularly between indigenous communities in the global South are linked to the maladministration of land and natural resources, the investment policy and governance that promotes large-scale mechanized agriculture is behind the problem in GRS. Though (trans)national investment companies benefiting neither the community in the region nor the country, the investment policy facilitates the taking away of the land – from which the lives and livelihoods of the rural poor is established – by the companies. Land is being taken away from the communities in a way that goes against article 40/1-5 of the constitution which not only guarantees free land use rights for agrarian and pastoral community but also the protection against eviction. Yet the investment policy, which is an offshoot of article 40/6 of the constitution that provides the power to decide 'who owns what? who does what? who gets what? What do they do with it?' to the government, failed to take into account the traditional way of living and communal land holding system of the agrarian and pastoral community.
The peasants' rights enshrined in the highest law of the land – constitution – should be properly implemented so as to empower the rural poor. It should be implemented in a way it protects the rights of each of the communities in the region. Moreover, beside expelling the investors and empower the peasants to grow in their own way, the government should revisit its land policy and governance. Land policy reform needed not only to benefit the peasants in the region but also to protect the country's resources and let the country get what it should get in a way that protects the rights of its people beyond the ecological and economic benefits. The reform that the government is committed to undertake in the country recently should also extend to the policy reforms to avert the negative implications of such policies that is affecting the rural dwellers beyond its role to repel the sweeping forces of capitalism from the rural poor.

Unless the democratic principle majority rule is properly executed, the minority rights, particularly in the context where conflict based on identity fault-lines prevails, is compromised and violated. This goes to the extent that alienates and marginalizes the minority. Othering the minority group such political system further deepened the antagonism between the two ethnic groups. Thus, listening to the locals and paying attention to the rural peasants at the grassroots level is imperative to avoid the antagonism in the region. Moreover, the paradox between the sub-articles of the constitution that promotes and safeguards the land use rights of the rural poor – article 40/1-5 and article 40/6, from which the country's land policy is derived, should be addressed to promote sustainable development and peace that not only benefits the existing rural dwellers but also the coming generation. A land policy that goes hand in hand with sustainable development and peace, grounded in the old ways of living of the rural dwellers, is of a paramount significance. Instead of looking over the traditional ways of shifting cultivation, which in fact protects the fauna and flora, deeming it inefficient in capitalist terms, it is important to devise policies that enable the rural poor to develop itself in its own way. Such apposite land and natural resource policies and governance lay an important ground for sustainable development beyond managing the inter-ethnic resource conflict in multi-ethnic societies.

Acknowledgement

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