

The USAID-DFID Ethiopia Recordings

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In January 2012, I was asked by United States Agency for International Development and Department for International Development to be a translator for a visit to the Mursi and Bodi of South Omo, Ethiopia, as I have worked in the area for eight years and am one of the few foreigners who speak Mursi language. The stated purpose was to “know more about how Government's commune plans are working in South Omo, how people are being moved, whether services are being provided etc. Linked to that ... to know more about how Government's big infrastructure and agricultural ambitions linked to GTP [Growth and Transformation Plan] - specifically the Gibe dams and land leasing - are impacting on communities.” A government-run sugarcane plantation was being established in the area and communities were being moved into resettlement sites in order to make the land available to the government plantations (although the government denies that the two are related). Widespread human rights abuses were being reported.

Human Rights Watch had just published a report on resettlement in the Gambella region (“Waiting here for Death: Forced Displacement and “Villagization” in Ethiopia’s Gambella Region”) which was critical of DFID’s role in helping to finance work in the resettlement sites. It was suggested by some that the visit by DFID and USAID staff to South Omo was prompted by the expectation at that time that HRW would shortly be releasing another report on human rights abuses in the Lower Omo, although publication of this was delayed until June 2012 (“What will happen if hunger comes”: abuses against the indigenous peoples of Ethiopia’s Lower Omo Valley’.) If this suggestion was correct, then DFID was coming to South Omo more to protect themselves from future political embarrassment, than to protect local people from the abuse of their human rights. Despite this, I hoped that showing these organizations the truth on the ground might move them to help the people of South Omo.

Our party, consisting of a representative from USAID and a USAID intern, two DFID representatives, two Mursi to help organize meetings and translate Bodi language, an Ethiopian driver, and I, left Jinka early in the morning and arrived later in a village near Haile Wuha. We proceeded to organize a meeting first with approximately 15 Mursi women, then afterwards with approximately 40 Mursi men. The Mursi asked that the highland Ethiopian driver with our group not be present at the meeting. The driver was then asked not to participate. It was clear the Mursi would not talk to us about sensitive issues with any highland Ethiopians present. I was also asked by the Mursi if I had “brought these people here?” i.e. did I vouch for the USAID and DFID representatives? I answered yes. It was clear that if an organization came in without a

person the community trusted, they would most likely not receive any information. I didn't think to turn on my audio recorder until the men's meeting. I put the recorder out in plain sight. When asked what the tape recorder was for by the person called DFID representative 1 in the transcript, I responded that I was recording in case the Mursi said anything interesting. Most of the questions from the USAID representative focused on development. 'Would the Mursi like to have schools and health centers? If they had schools here how would that impact on their partially nomadic lifestyle?' Later the USAID representative's questions were about the truth of the Bodis' claims, such as how well do you know that person that you said was raped. It was the Mursi and later the Bodi that brought up the issues of abuses by the government, such as denial of access to all their subsistence land on the Omo River, forced evictions, lack of consultation and indeed coercion involving the Ethiopian military. At one point DFID representative 1 said it was telling that both the Mursi and the Bodi had brought up the issue of the rape of the Bodi boy by government soldiers "unprompted". The Mursi were so adamant about telling about the abuses that they ignored questions about water development and schools and brought the DFID and USAID people back to the subject of abuses. The meeting with the Mursi men became extremely tense, as is clear from the meeting transcript. The Mursi wanted to make sure they were heard and the USAID representative keeps asking to leave at that point. I thought it unwise to leave without having made sure that the Mursi felt they had been heard, so the interview was extended.

After the interviews in Mursi we left for the Bodi area, near Gura. On this trip the USAID representative was telling DFID representative 1 that they could not verify even one of the claims in Human Rights Watch's Gambella report. DFID representative 1 remarked, "I thought it was quite good". In general, I found that both DFID representatives seemed genuinely concerned about the welfare of the Bodi and Mursi. On the other hand, the USAID representative seemed to have made up her mind that these claims were untrue even before she arrived in the area. The Bodi village was smaller with many of the people out of the village doing various tasks. We waited a while for the Bodi present to search for others, who then trickled in. As the meeting began we had approximately ten Bodi women and five Bodi men. Again, I didn't think to turn on the audio recorder until halfway through the meeting. DFID asked questions that were about abuses of procedure in the resettlement plans. DFID representative 2 asked what the consultation processes were like. A Bodi man answered that in a consultation meeting in Gura, there were so many armed military present that one "couldn't count them all" and they knew if they didn't agree to what they were being told they "would have to answer to" the military. They discussed the rapes by the military around Hana and being chased out of their cultivation areas for plantation development. The meeting adjourned and our party was back in Jinka before dark. I felt content that the USAID and DFID had heard enough about government abuses to lead them to act.

Weeks later I heard from a high-up in USAID that the USAID representative had told him that the accounts of human rights abuses she had heard in the Omo, were all “third-hand”. It is clear from the transcripts, however, that many of these accounts were first-hand. Most important are the numerous accounts of being told by the government that the Mursi and Bodi were not to plant at their cultivation sites on the Omo River and other places in their territory such as, “We are hungry now. Our land has been taken. We’ve had to abandon our cultivation sites on the Omo River.” And “This man used to live in the Usso area. In that place one was able to grow a lot of grain. . . . Now the government went in there and chased them away, so he has come here, but this place is not so good. It is dry. “

Development organizations including DFID who “support government initiatives that involve the relocation of individuals and communities” in Ethiopia, laid out resettlement policy guidelines for the Ethiopian government in a document entitled “Good Practice Guidelines and Principles Regarding Resettlement”. I discussed with the USAID/DFID team the failure of the Ethiopian government to adhere to this policy. Later at the British Council in Addis Ababa I brought this up with another DFID representative saying, ‘at least half of the guidelines in that paper are not being followed.’ She replied, “None of them are being followed!”

In response to HRW’s first report on resettlement in Gambella USAID and DFID did a three-day inquiry (they say six but in other reports they count the travel time which in this case is about three days) into the resettlement programs in the region. The report of the inquiry hardly addressed the primary issue of the HRW report: government abuses of the local people, except to say that it found the moves to the resettlement site were voluntary, but “internationally funded food aid intended for free distribution for relief is being used to encourage community participation in the programme.” i.e to entice the communities into the resettlement sites. The inquiry found that it could not substantiate any of the allegations made in the HRW report. And according to a USAID high-up I met in Addis Ababa ‘it was just Diaspora from the Gambella region causing trouble for political reasons.’ USAID reported this unsubstantiation of allegations to the Development Assistance Group (DAG), 26 of the major aid agencies around the globe that donate to Ethiopia including the UNDP, IMF, and the World Bank. Karuturi of India, the biggest land investor in Ethiopia, and one that has been faced with criticism from human rights groups said, “Financing may be easier to obtain now that Ethiopia’s donors have countered criticism from rights groups about projects.”

I met the man from USAID who participated in the inquiry into allegations of human rights abuses in the Gambella region. He asked me for contact information for missionaries in the Mursi area. When it became clear that he intended to go down to the South Omo, I sent him contact information for community members who could take him to talk with the communities. He did not use any of these contacts and instead went to the mission in Makki, where no one

was present. For one, although the missionaries in Makki do a good job of providing health care and schooling to the Mursi, they are extremely wary of getting involved in anything that is critical of the government. I know this from years of personal experience of them. In a January 19, 2012 newsletter discussing the issue of resettlement they say, “. . . we are discouraging people from taking political action on behalf of the Mursi or their neighbours.” From what I have heard about this trip, the USAID representative talked with the Government and tried to talk with the missionaries, but were unsuccessful and then went back to USAID headquarters in Addis Ababa.

I also brought two Mursi to meet with the USAID Mission Director and Deputy Mission Director for Ethiopia in March, 2012. The Mursi reported that they had been prevented from cultivating on the Omo River, that Bodi and Kwegu had had grain stores destroyed and cultivation areas plowed up, all without consultation. They also reported rapes by the Ethiopian military. But we have still not seen any public movement from USAID.

One may conclude that attempts, by both USAID and DFID, to get to the bottom of alleged human rights abuses in Gambella and South Omo have been half-hearted and superficial. And yet these organizations were prepared to make public statements, including to the influential Donor Assistance Group, that the allegations they had heard were ‘unsubstantiated’, while at the same time undermining much more thorough and serious attempts to gain information in both of these regions. Human Rights Watch conducted 100 interviews for their initial report on the Gambella region and followed this by 100 more interviews of refugees from the region in Sudanese and Kenyan refugee camps. I visited the project area of the sugarcane plantations in South Omo and shot and recorded extensive interviews with 33 local people from three different Ethnic groups during a period of more than a month, then translated them. These interviews were later used by Human Rights Watch in their lower Omo report. One has to ask why are USAID and DFID acting this way? The suspicion must be that they are doing so to give comfort and support their ally Ethiopia, with whom they have firm strategic and military ties. Ethiopia’s neighbor Somali is seen as a potential hotbed of Al Queda and Islamist militants. The US and Ethiopian governments have collaborated in attacks on Somalia and the US now operates regular drone flights over Somalia from a military base in Arba Minch.

Britain’s Minister for Overseas Development said in response to a parliamentary question on November 5th, 2012 that ‘the Department for International Development was not able to substantiate the allegations of human rights violation it received during its visit to South Omo in January 2012, and will be returning to the area to examine these further’. A DFID spokeswoman told the Sunday Times in November 2012 that, “We have visited the South Omo region twice — in January and again recently’. In fact, a delegation from DFID, the EU, and Irish Aid is reported

to have visited the sugar plantations on 13-14 November, but as yet DFID has not responded to requests for information about the findings of this visit. In any case, the tape recordings I made of the interviews carried out by DFID in January 2012 show beyond any reasonable doubt that human rights violations have taken place. Indeed, I wonder whether one of the reasons DFID went back in November was that in September I had sent them the transcripts of their interviews with Mursi and Bodi and they realised the publication of these transcripts could cause them political embarrassment.

DFID and USAID went to South Omo in advance of a Human Rights Watch report that was likely to be critical of DFID. Having heard first-hand allegations that human rights abuses had taken place, DFID then claimed that these were 'unsubstantiated', and then, it did not return for another ten months to investigate further. What is one to make of this? It is difficult not to conclude that DFID and USAID are more interested in protecting their reputation and relationship with the Ethiopian government, than they are in being truthful about human rights abuses.