Tainting the developmental path a futile exercise

(Negussie Kassa)

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The famed French author and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, André Gide said that once that “Everything that needs to be said has already been said. But since no one was listening, everything must be said again”

This is a befitting expression for the debate with rights-groups. Despite constant and consistent refutations of their allegations, they keep on pompously claiming that any other evidence, from whatever source, however reputable, should be disregarded unless and except it concurs with their make believe stories.

Human Rights Watch's latest campaign against the villagization program is one such cases. The organization reiterated its claimed that the villagization program is violates peoples' rights as their participation is forced.

In a letter to the World Bank, Human Rights Watch claimed that: "forced evictions and development-related displacement continues to have serious negative effects on communities in various parts of the country, well beyond Gambella. While the government has officially finished its villagization program, it continues to forcibly evict people, including indigenous peoples, from their land ostensibly for development projects, including large-scale agriculture, including for sugar plantation development in the Lower Omo Valley."

Basing on this unfounded allegation, the organization sneaked its political and ideological demands asking that: "it is crucial that the Bank asserts the importance of civic participation and social accountability for effective development. This means consistently raising concerns, and urging reforms of the Ethiopian government’s Charities and Societies Proclamation and Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, which have had such a devastating impact on the ability of Ethiopians to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly."

Indeed, it went on to suggest that Ethiopia's sovereignty be slashed and to be made under a sort of western protectorate, in the following words: "the bank should require
independent third party monitoring and independent grievance redress mechanisms for all of its projects in Ethiopia. Until the environment for independent organizations, including nongovernmental organizations and the media, improves substantially".

The allegations underlying all these far-fetched demands of Human Rights watch had long been discredited.

Villagization policies and strategies are introduced for various purposes, particularly to avert and redress damages, consequent to environmental degradation, droughts, famines due to desertification; to accelerate development; to extend basic infrastructural services and amenities and other associated benefits. Indeed, villagization scheme is bound to introduce positive change in their way of life due to their proximity to basic services and amenities, and the fact families, which had been living in scattered and unaided distant hamlets, could obtain close support and aid.

Nonetheless, any villagization program to achieve its beneficial goals must be: based on the citizens way of life; preceded by effective pre-operation study; fully established infrastructures; assured of the citizens’ voluntary acceptance; and guarantee respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual and of the communities.

In the past, it is to be noted that villagization program was attempted by the Dergue regime, started in earnest in January 1985. By the end of 1989, more than 13 million people had been relocated in villages in twelve of the fourteen administrative regions. But it was soon discontinued as counter-productive due to varying internal operational contradictions as well as exogenous factors.

Beginning from the year 2010, the Ethiopian Government has launched a villagization program of a different nature: That is Voluntary.

The program plan was designed to include the five major objectives, which are enabling the communities dispersed in various parts of the regions to join together to establish a central village for sustainable and stable way of life; facilitating access to basic development services and amenities to the people; raising the livelihoods of the communities that are totally dependent on cattle raising to a more productive semi-pastoralist stage; ensuring food security and enabling the people partake in the benefits of sustainable development and of good governance.

These objectives had been elaborated in the Ministry of Federal Affairs document, entitled "Core Issues of the Rural Development Policy, Strategies and Systems and
Development Policies, Strategies and Framework in Pastoralist and Semi-pastoralist areas: Directions for Ensuring Rapid and Sustainable Development”.

The Ministry's document elaborated the five pillar objectives as follows:

To enable dispersed communities establish sustainable stable life in central villages: The majorities of the communities, in which the villagization programs are in operation, are dispersed far and wide and in so far as they are mainly cattle herders, they live in constant mobility in search of grazing land and water sources and cannot maintain stable and sustainable livelihood. As such, delivery of basic and infrastructural services to such communities requires employment and application of substantial amounts and levels of human resource, capital as well as technological capabilities. It is, furthermore, an obstacle to ensure, in common, the citizens economic, social, cultural, political and administrative rights and benefits.

To make infrastructure, social and economic services accessible to citizens: The Constitution specifies social and economic rights among the fundamental rights and freedoms of all citizens. In parallel with the citizens’ rights, it charges the State with responsibility to respect and fulfill them. And, in order to discharge this duty the government has planned and developed diverse strategies and implementation policies. The villagization program has been undertaken in the various Regional States of the country to ensure access to the communities in the project to benefit from these rights. Therefore, enabling the citizens to readily benefit from the various infrastructural services and amenities, which were not available when the communities lived dispersedly, such as education, health, water, road, electricity, etc. are one of the major objectives of villagization.

To improve the livelihood of the pastoralist’s to a more productive semi-pastoralist level: In our country although the economy of the majority of its citizens is based on farming and related agriculture, there are also found, in some specific low lands, communities whose main livelihood is livestock herding. These include communities in the Somali and Afar Regional States and in South Omo Zone in the SNNP Region. The livelihood of these communities is primitive cattle-raising and, as such, they alternately travel throughout the year to various areas in rainy and dry seasons in pursuit of grazing fields and water sources for their live-stock. In essence these communities do not contribute productively to the economic sector. It is in this context that the government is undertaking villagization programs to collect and settle the erstwhile mobile cattle herding communities in development centers and through training in modern cattle-raising and farming methods and gradually providing appropriate agricultural inputs, transform them into participants in, and beneficiaries of, the agricultural sector.
To ensure food security in order to prevent disasters of intermittent drought and food insufficiency: The communities of the regions undertaking villagization programs gain in major part, their livelihood from cattle herding and shift cultivation using primitive farming and breeding systems. These factors militate against the regions attaining food security. Furthermore, they are vulnerable to recurrent natural disasters from alternating droughts and floods; and since they do not have access to close-by development infrastructure, they are exposed to extreme food shortages. The major objective of the villagization program is to prevent the above stressed problem of food shortage by collecting these communities in village centers to enable them benefit from application of modern agricultural methods, and thereby ensure food security.

To ensure the citizens benefit from sustainable development and good governance: Beyond the objective of villagization elaborated hereinabove, there lies the primary plan to ensure all citizens are beneficiaries of development. In conjunction with this plan, villagization accelerates the ability of the citizens to be beneficiaries of good governance, through enriching their participation be it in the development process or in the political sphere.

Indeed, the government of Ethiopia has developed and implemented an integrated rural development policy to improve the quality of life and the conditions of livelihood of its citizens, be they farmers or pastoralists in the rural sectors of the country. The policy indicates that one of the issues to be given attention is the implementation process of the villagization program. The policy further incorporates the activities preceding the process of moving the people to the village centers.

The villagization program was implemented as per these grand objectives and detailed directives and manuals.

The first step taken was the preparation of the definitive directives, strategies and operational manuals at the federal level. Within these general frameworks, a primary component is the Manual, prepared by the Ministry of Federal Affairs, for the implementation of villagization, defining the overall operational process of executing the program. The Ministry’s three-year implementation strategy for the regions requiring special support was prepared as an intrinsic element of the Manual. A further subject dealt by the Manual is the directive for enhancing the livelihood. These directives, strategies and manuals, for the sake of uniformity, are mostly prepared by federal organs which support regions. However from discussions made with heads of those regions’ agriculture bureaus, it is understood that while enforcing these directives, strategies and manuals regions make some modification to fit their objective realities and also make specific plans.
Diverse organizational structures have been created to execute the full villagization program by the offices and institutions from those of the Ministry of Federal Affairs to the Regional Kebele units. It was learned from the director of the Directorate of Compatible Development of the Ministry of Federal Affairs, for the purposes of close supervision at the Federal level, a high official and a Federal Board, Chaired by the Ministry have been appointed and established, respectively, by the government. The members of the Federal Board are the Ministries of Education, Agriculture, Health, Water and Energy and Civil Service.

In each of the regions that have undertaken villagization programs, various organizations at successive levels from regional administration to the Kebele have been set up to ensure conclusive implementation processes and productive outcomes, while maintaining close consultation with regional leadership. Although there are certain differences among these committees, due to specific regional objective realities, the basic organ gram contains a Steering Committee; Technical Committee; Public Relations and Mobilization Committee, Logistics and Resources identification Committee. The committees operate closely /jointly with sectoral agencies and institutions.

In addition to formulating legal framework and creating organizational structures with regard to the program, identification of specific sectors of communities to be incorporated in the respective program has been completed. In the course of identification, it was planned to give priority to those communities which habitually moved from one area to another, in response to recurrent drought and famine cycles, to provide them with access to river basins and underground water sources. This form of prioritization, i.e. on basis of river basins, was applied in villagization programs in Afar and Somali regions, whereas the settlement on basis of underground water sources was done only in the case of Somali Region’s Shinelle. Furthermore, concerning such areas exposed to recurrent flooding disasters, studies have been carried to include them in the programs to reduce the ravages of the drastic occurrences and duly prevent them totally. For instance, one of the reasons for which the Gambela program was undertaken by the regional government was in order to prevent the displacement of the people whenever the Baro River broke its embankments and flooded the surrounding areas.

Activities have also been carried out to select community settlement, livelihood and development compatible areas. Each regional government has basically used the following criteria in the selection of compatibility of the areas:-

- the existence of permanent rivers, underground water, dry rivers, springs and hot mineral waters,
• the lie of the land and its agricultural potential, the fertility and agricultural compatibility,
• accessibility of adequate grazing land,
• availability of adequate water and land resource,
• willingness of the communities to participate in the villagization center program.
• healthy environment and security from natural and man-made risks and disasters, such as conflicts, drought, floods etc: and
• the availability of basic service delivery institutions and agencies.

In Benshangul /Gumuz and Afar regions, conditions were available for the citizens to select the areas for the establishment of their own development centers.

On completion of the identification and selection process, the land was prepared, i.e. cleared, broken and leveled. In some villages, the citizens themselves carried out the land preparation task, the particular region worth mentioning here is Gambela. In the region, the difficulty encountered by the citizens in land preparation had impeded their activities. In some regions, it was observed that in certain development centers, the farmland prepared for them was salty and the brine arrested the growth of their crops, and the wells dug for hand-pump operation for drinking water was of high fluorine concentration that they were forced to bring water from other areas. In the Afar region, in the village centers in the Amibara Woreda program, the citizens suffered from this salinity problem.

On another aspect, as part of the pre-implementation study, it is directed that on conclusion of the area selection process and prior to collecting the people into the development centers, certain essential infrastructural services and amenities must be set in place. These basic needs and activities include schools, health care stations, water, roads, lightings, etc.

Indeed, the villagization program was not only a delivery of infrastructure and services but also empowerment.

Citizens’ democratic participation and their willingness play indispensable roles in the success of national development policies and directions. As declared in the FDRE Constitution, the right to development is not only about benefits of the people but also includes peoples’ right to participate in national development.

It is on the basis of the above imperatives that, consultation forums were arranged for the various sections of the society and citizens to participate in discussions on the subjects of the benefits, objectives and outcomes of villagization. Government
authorities, in their respective levels, created public arenas for discussion and solicitation of views and opinions from the citizens on this vital subject. In the event, much work has been done to create public awareness and convince the citizens of the benefits of gathering and forming cohesive communities and engaging them in their own specified regions in sedentary “mixed” agriculture (farming and cattle raising) and thereby create for themselves better and productive life.

These observations had been confirmed by the independent Ethiopian Human Rights Commission a few months ago.

EHRC conducted a study that covered all the regions where the villagization program has been undertaken. That is Gambela, Afar, Somali, Benshangul/Gumuz, the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP), Amhara and Tigray regional states. The numbers of village centers surveyed in the 13 woredas (from the total of 63 woredas) of the regions are 23.

In its study, EHRC used purposive sampling method was employed for the collection and compilation of balanced and detailed data and gathered primary data via questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions with villagers.

EHRC's research teams learned that:

"in discussions with administration authorities and with the communities, that the citizens have become aware as results of their discussions and consultations of the benefits of development centers and responded with initiative and joined willingly. In particular, the positive response of the communities in the Benshangul /Gumuz region enabled the Woredas concerned to perform effectively beyond the planned targets. For example, the Bambasi Woreda which had undertaken in 2003E.C., to establish six village centers was obliged to construct additional four centers in response to the free initiative of communities in other Kebeles to participate in the program, As a result, the Bambasi Woreda achieved beyond the plan target and established ten development centers".

In general, EHRC's report highlighted its findings as follows:

1. Public consultations must be carried out with respect to villagization ahead of mobilization and the acceptance of the program should be arrived at in free will. The consultation processes have been carried out in all the Regions and the people in majority of cases were moved to the villages based on their free will.
2. In order to ensure congruence between the villagization activities and the needs and requirements of the citizens, the publicly elected committees were adjuncted to the Government’s joint Federal Affairs and Region’s establishments of certain sectors, such as social services, security and the like.

3. In most regions, credible work has been done in allotment of adequate farmland; establishment of agricultural support institutions such as farmers training centers, distribution of agricultural tools and implements and setting veterinary service centers.

4. The endeavors in all regions to provide, at least partly development infrastructures, i.e. education institutions, health stations and health centers; and water supply facilities in advance of the arrival of the citizens into the villages.

5. Considering the extreme difficulties of access to education and health the citizens used to suffer from in the past, the considerable improvements attained in having these services readily in their village centers are encouraging.

6. Of particular note is the relief to man and cattle in the Somali Region from the drudgery and travail of constant movement from area to area in search of water source and pasture land.

7. The multiple benefits to the citizen in terms of access to education engendering communal awareness, and the likely reduction of the social damages of harmful tradition and customs to mothers and children; and the availability of health care institutions for obstetrics care; and the delivery of the regimes of infant and child vaccines.

These are the findings of a methodologically sound research conducted by a human rights group present on the ground in Ethiopia.

Where does Human Rights Watch get its allegations?