The never ending empty rhetoric of the intruders

By Seifu Bogale  08/21/13

Without being exhausted with the scorching sun, the 57 years old, Farmer Aliyie Sani, plough the ragged land drawn the blades fixed in his two oxen over the already depleted soil that has already been depleted due to consistently being used for generations from time of antiquity – drained to produce barely any more yield. A decade ago, Farmer Aliyie told the media that ‘The crop refuses to grow on two or three plots of land. Farmers have been stripped here. We work hard and don’t even produce one full load. We used to produce up to 200 loads. Now we didn’t even get three loads.’

Surviving with his four children and a wife having no other option to win bread for the family, Farmer Aliyie struggled to dig the land with the centuries old traditional farming method. The desperation vividly used to be seen in his tiresome face and the worn out rags that covered his body depicted the arduous struggle Farmer Aliyie and the entire Ziquala Woreda people in Wag Hamra Zone are facing just to survive under such precarious living conditions for decades.

Farmer Aliyie expressed then that ‘I farmed all of this land and got only three loads. Will that pay for my clothes? My food? My shoes? You see my clothes are like this. My shoes are rubber. What remains for me is to go for begging. The land is bare. The cattle have no shade. They pant all day.’
Each year, approximately 20,000 hectares of farm land in the highlands are abandoned because the soil can no longer sustain agriculture. Land degradation among other combination of factors including population pressure, small land holdings, erratic rainfall and a number of negative economic factors such as low cereal prices has left millions of rural Ethiopians in need of relief food aid through the past years.

Cognizant of the challenges that may surface in sustaining rural farmers with food aid for so long, the Ethiopian Government strived to take time, energy and capital to design a lasting solution for the problem. During the early years of this century, the Government designed a Voluntary Resettlement Program aimed at enabling chronically food insecure households attain food security through improved access to land and voluntary resettlement. The program identified localities where acute lack of land constraints food production, and those where fertile land is available for cultivation.

While Ethiopia has exactly 100 million hectares of land, of which it is estimated that more than 70 million hectares of land are arable, although not all of it is under cultivation. Following an exhaustive assessment process by the federal government and regional governments, some 3.67 million hectares of arable land, less than 4 percent of the country’s total mass was identified as underutilized and uninhabited and, consequently, designated as available for voluntary resettlement program and large-scale agriculture investment which both would, moreover, help assure Ethiopia’s food security.

One of the families who were willing to register and move to the identified suitable resettlement areas in the Amhara region in the first phase of the program were the family of Farmer Aliye Sani. Farmer Aliye and his family among other families have moved to one of three woredas, namely Metemma, Quara and Tach Armacheho that were identified as suitable for resettlement in Amhara Region. Farmer Aliye and his family have been living in Metema, since leaving his home in Wag Hamra almost a decade ago, leading quite a modest life in his new home.

Farmer Aliye says ‘in the initial period, even though life was harsh, it was somewhat challenging for me and my family to
move away from our birth place being afraid of unmet expectations. After settling here it took us only few weeks to adapt the relatively hotter.’ After receiving three hectares of fertile land allocated to him following his arrival, he has been producing enough food for the family and moreover recently starts to produce surplus yield for sale generating income for his family. Farmer Aliye is delighted by his decision to register for the voluntary resettlement program when he heard that the government was arranging to move people to a place where there is fertile land.

What have brought magnificent change in the life of the settlers were the integration packages that includes food aid and agricultural tools as well as an ox and three hectares of land per family provided to the settlers during the first years of their arrival until they become self-sufficient.

‘Most of us who came from Wag Hamra where we were eking out a living in a very destitute condition now after settling here in Metema, we are able to build fortune. Our children are attending classes and they are healthy and happy,’ said Farmer Aliye. The settlers were also assured by the government that their lands at their home were reserved following the next two cropping seasons (two years) and that the settlers are free to decide whether to stay at the new sites or not. They have also full autonomy to travel back and forth between the new homes and their original villages during the period. Farmer Aliye added that ‘through the past years I and my wife twice visited Wag Hamra our origin just to visit our relatives living there. It was a pity that most of them were reluctant to voluntarily register for the resettlement program.’

Since the launch of the Ethiopian voluntary resettlement program, a steady stream of sensationalist reports in the press releases of self-appointed ‘watchdog’ groups promptly picked by the media without any attempt to check the claims have been filed by the media erroneously alleging that the resettlement program is forcing hundreds of thousands of people off their land by military action and that the land is being cleared for industrial use and to lease their land to foreign investors.

Many of these fabricated reports originated in the press releases of self-appointed ‘watchdog’ groups as Dr. Peter Pham put them as ‘groups seeking publicity for the extended op-eds masquerading as scientific studies’. These INGOs invented, distorted, and manipulated stories to suit predetermined political and neoliberalism agendas based on impartial researchers Graham Peeble, political interests, or ideological biases. The stories that come out from these INGOs press releases soon filed in the media stories, quote in publications and the fabricated stories make their appearances in the media, diplomats and academics outputs. They invest a lot in public relation works that it, thus, “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.” Works!
Following reports that resettlement activities started in mid-February 2003, UN and other international organizations undertook field missions. They met officials at the regional, zonal, woreda and kebele levels. For a balanced view, household and community interviews were held with settlers and the host population at resettlement sites. Recently, DFID, USAID, the UN and Irish Aid in 2011 have undertaken detail assessments, notably in Gambella Region have found no evidence of forced relocation or systematic human rights abuses.

Discussions at the regional, zonal, woreda and kebele levels unanimously indicated that the potential settlers are better off in the relocated sites where there is sufficient arable and fertile land to support tens of thousands of people. While all non-partisan groups acknowledge that the resettlement programme is entirely based on voluntary and full participation from targeted settlers and host communities, those self-appointed watchdogs in their bias reports accuse the government as employing violence and intimidation to enforce people to leave their lands.

Some of such organizations known in designing their research methodologies rather in ideological blinders, the Human Rights Watch, Oakland Institute and other neoliberalism advocates reported that the Ethiopian Government’s villagization program employed violence, intimidation, and political coercion. It is true that in the absence of consistent and reputable methodologies, it is not surprising that the reports of these biased INGO and their cohorts lack credibility as the employment of biased and unqualified investigators invalidates any reports.

Human Rights Watch, the Oakland Institute and few who claim to be ‘researchers’ in the field yet the fact shows that as they are advocating the agendas of the self-appointed watchdogs, bombast negative reports about Ethiopia’s resettlement programme and large-scale farming investment through their flawed ideological blinded ‘researches’. It has become part of their main duties for the past two decades to portray countries like Ethiopia negatively in all aspects of social, economic and political spectrum.

Methodologically, while the UN and other non-partisan international organizations for balanced view interviewed household and community members with settlers and the host population at a resettlement sites as well as conducting interviews with government officials at federal, regional, zonal, woreda and kebele levels, none of the Human Rights Watch, the Oakland Institute and similar organizations operating under a hidden agenda have tried to make any effort at least to discuss any governmental official at any level. Their claims were based on some testimonies made by unidentified witnesses – the underground world of reporting.

The so-called INGO, humans rights organizations like Human Rights Watch, Oakland Institute and the like for the past two decades have waged war against some countries like Ethiopia
trying to design their development policies indigenously rather than willing to import from the west. These organizations have a Western-centric tinge to everything they do. One critic put it as “They seem to provide ‘human rights' justification for certain Western policies of foreign aggression.”

As aforementioned, the Oakland Institute erroneously reported that at least 3,619,509ha of land (an area just smaller than Belgium) have been transferred to investors, although the actual number may be higher. The report noted as the government claims that. And, the Institute’s report crammed with rudeness slurs the governments honest claims that the land available for lease is unused and surplus as ‘disingenuous nonsense’.

In truth what is deviously nonsense is the report itself which at least knowingly missed the basic facts such as since the beginning of the resettlement program the land transferred for local and foreign investors is not 3,619,509ha as they claim rather 395,000 hectares leased to the grand total of 234 foreign investors, including members of the Ethiopian Diaspora– just over 10 percent of the total arable land eligible for such leases under the government’s program and barely half of 1 percent of the total arable land in the country.

It is important also to add further details on the leased land that the land identified as underutilized and uninhibited and, available for lease to large-scale agricultural projects is found in the Benshangul Gumuz Region (1,148,852 hectares), Gamebela Regional State (1,226,893 hectares), Oromia (1,069,967 hectares), Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People’s Region (209,725 hectares), and the Amhara region (6,183 hectares).

Ridiculously enough, the report alleged that ‘investors are allowed to do what they will with the land they lease. This includes diverting rivers, digging canals from existing water sources, building dams and drilling bore holes.’ What they don’t really understand is as the place is Ethiopia - no human being is allowed to play out of the rule. The fact is that any investor who fails to develop the land as agreed up on or fails to protect the environment is consequently loses the land. In this regard overall, from the total land leased to the investors some 75,000 hectares was repossessed because the leaseholders either failed to develop the land as agreed upon or violated environmental regulations. These hectares have been returned to the pool of land that is potentially available for large scale agricultural development.

This fallacious reporting clearly depicts as the institute is acting as "ideational vectors of influence", trying to skillfully maneuver facts to continue maintaining its constant criticism against Ethiopia for achieving their own principled ends. The Oakland Institute and HRW further want to direct the policy change in Ethiopia notably the land tenure system to get out of the government ownership criticizing absurdly as the policy is worsening poverty. This a continuation of what free market economists from the Western world for decades have simply
prescribed greater market liberalization, decreases in tariff barriers, and widespread
deregulation of the market to combat extreme poverty.

What they should know is just to quote from Dr. Peter Pham discussion, ‘Ethiopia’s robust
economic growth owes a great deal to the strong performance of its agricultural sector, which
is another reason it is rather unlikely that the country’s government has it “in” for the
estimated 13-15 million smallholders who produce more than 95 percent of agricultural
output, which in turn contributes nearly half of national GDP and even larger proportions of
employment and export earnings.’

The large-scale farming investment initiatives as well as the voluntary resettlement program
are parts of the Ethiopian Government’s comprehensive development plans focusing on
agriculture-led economic growth as a long-lasting solution to Ethiopia’s chronic poverty and
food insecurity.

Contrary to what these biased INGOs politically motivated claims, non-partisan international
organizations have repeatedly inarguably indicated that no facts found to substantiate the
wilder politically motivated claims made by human rights advocacy organizations, opposition
politicians in exile, by members and supporters of opposition groups.

In fact, all the genuinely independent investigations underline the improvements that
villagization has brought to the lives of the people in all resettlements sites including in
Gambella Regional State, and other areas in Ethiopia. The program is making it far easier for
the government to deliver basic services, including health centers, schools, water supplies,
routes and other developments. For Farmer Aliyie and the great majority of those involved the
results are certainly welcomed.

The voluntary resettlement programme is one of the most important food security strategies
of the Federal Government of Ethiopia under the general coordination of the Ministry of Rural
Development.

Earl Gast, USAID Assistant Secretary, recently acknowledged the positive changes the country
is making towards improving the life of the citizens and the remarkable results it is achieving
saying ‘Ethiopia has experienced a period of relative stability and marked improvements in the
well-being of its people. For example, the Government of Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net
Program (PSNP), which has provided food and cash in exchange for building community
infrastructure, helped prevent 7.2 million people from slipping into crisis during the historic
2011 – 12 drought.’

Political dialogue, legal education, and court reforms through a variety of groups, including
with civil society organizations, universities and the Government are being supported by
USAID directly. The Assistant Secretary said that it is in the interest of the US to fund these civil
society organizations that deliver services in a manner that is accountable to the citizenry and respectful; of human rights.

Ethiopia is one of the first African members of the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, a commitment by G8 members, African countries, and the private sector to reduce poverty through inclusive agricultural growth.

Ethiopians firmly believe that sustainable solutions to our problems will only come from within. What our international partners can support us is not nagging, hectoring and threat rather supportive diplomacy and partnership based on mutual interest. We have the right and option to choose with whom to make partnership with in the current world that is witnessing the emergence of divergent international actors able and willing to work with us. Ethiopia strides to make itself reliance in its own.

Ethiopia is often comes amongst the first ones that comes into their minds whenever they plot a mechanism for demonization of the country declared as non-democratic. Though they don’t recommend bombers and cruise missiles can be send to rectify to whatever negative situation they illusionary portray, they have never gave up the suggestion to stop aid to Ethiopia, ill-ridden and inhumane ammunition.

The Oakland Institute, Human Rights Watch and similar advocators of neo-colonialism alleged that international aid is directly and indirectly involved into the villagization program that enforced people to leave their land for large scale farming. The main donors also approve of and support - at least tacitly – the government policy of agricultural ‘modernization’, which in the absence of land tenure for local people is resulting in local land being given away to establish large-scale agricultural plantations run by foreign companies.

Though development aid has contributed enormously in helping Ethiopia and other developing countries to fight diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria as well as other critical emergency situations, what they should know is as aid or not aid is the solution for development of developing countries. We recognize the significant contribution of the international actors during the 1980s famine and the support they are also rendering in various sectors. However, as we are proud people imbued with deep sense of history and nationhood, we don’t compromise our independence in whatever circumstances. We know how to overcome our division and in times of challenges our motherland may face.

It should be noted that aid or not aid is not a "Band-Aid Solution" or a form of welfare or a weapon to distract a nation; rather, aid is a form of economic stimulus which allows a nation to begin ascent up the Ladder of Development. In this regard, Ethiopia

William Easterly repeatedly mentions that more than $2.3 trillion has already been given to the developing world over the last 50 years; if aid was truly a successful means of promoting
development he argues that targeted impoverished nations should have already eradicated extreme poverty by now. Furthermore, he points out that much aid is wasted on projects whose primary purpose is to glorify the aid organization instead of helping the impoverished citizens; additional aid is wasted on supportive of rich world interests or overthrowing regimes.

It is common that project proposals seeking assistance in infrastructure development such as school constructions are very seldom generating positive response from INGOs, rather what these ‘development agents’ determined to support are the project proposals that are entirely spend in workshop, seminars, etc. It is plausible to say that aid that is focused on infrastructure development, health and education as well as human resource capacity building could serve best to help grow our economies.

It is visible that the Oakland Institute, Human Rights Watch and similar advocators of neo-colonialism are part of the organs working in the business ideology production that propagating ideology via think tanks, educational institutions, academic disciplines and the media.

With such organizations ridden with hidden agenda trying to influence the international community with their blunder and deception disseminating throughout the media that fails to watch the watchers, it is very difficult to buy as there would be a genuine effort from the west to help encounter the development challenges facing the developing world. Yet, with the world becoming more and more cognizant the ill-motives those INGOs like the Oakland Institute, Human Rights Watch and the like are driven with, we don’t lose hope genuine cooperation based on mutual benefit among the rich and poor countries may reap fruit in the future despite the crooked intention of the intruders. The recently held the 12th annual African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) Forum in Addis Ababa featuring business leaders and government officials representing the United States and several African countries is a case in point.

AGOA helped last year 39 AGOA-eligible sub-Saharan African countries to export nearly $35 billion in products to the United States. AGOA provides incentives for African countries to improve their investment climates, reduce corruption, respect human and labor rights and the rule of law, improve infrastructure and harmonize trade standards to help them become more competitive in the global marketplace.

Hoping that the United States would renew AGOA that expires in September 2015, it won’t be too far farmers like Farmer Aliyie Sani and too many others may produce agriculture products to export earnings through US-Africa Trade Africa initiative by properly using the current facilitating environment that help the transition of subsistence farmers into commercial economies. Even then, the unhelpful negative bombast pouring from the Oakland Institute,
Human Rights Watch and similar advocates of neo-colonialism against any development in Ethiopia may continue having camouflaged with another story angle – quite simply there won’t be an end to empty rhetoric that comes from the intruders.