

## The other side of SEW BEZA YE-REHAB NEGER BEZA<sup>1</sup>

By Aie Zi Guo, August, 2006

At a glance Professor Donald N. Levine's article Sew Beza Ye-Rehab Neger Beza (June, 2006 Ethiopian Review) captivates a curious mind interested to read what a renowned professor of his caliber would say to Ethiopians. Notwithstanding that population increase naturally leads to increased mouths to feed, is poverty a major cause of hunger and famine<sup>2</sup>? To answer this question it is important to analyze the socio-economic and political causes that lead to famine and hunger in Ethiopia. The immediate causes are inadequate food intake and inadequate household food security. The underlying causes are inadequate caring capacity, and inadequate provision of essential services including health, education, housing, water and sanitation. And finally, the basic causes are economic, ecological, political, cultural and institutional. Cognizant that these causes are complex and interdependent, famine and hunger are mainly the consequences of basic causes.

As the professor understands Ethiopia's rain fed agriculture is entirely dependent on nature's generosity. Farmers are vulnerable to natural disasters including crop failure in the highland and lowland areas. Failure of crop contributes to increased household vulnerability. This is further exasperated by ill-conceived socio-economic and political policies of governments, donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Government policies:

For decades Ethiopian farmers and pastoralists have been victimized by inappropriate economic and political policies of governments. Currently farmers have no incentives to increase agricultural production. Farm gate prices do not reflect actual costs of production. Unlike the rich commercial farmers in North America whose produce is protected from dwindling market prices through state subsidies, Ethiopian farmers are without any form of production safety net. Small scale agro industries that process farm products to stimulate peasant agriculture are non-existent or to a bare minimum. Prices of agricultural inputs like fertilizers, improved seeds and farm tools are beyond the purchasing power of farmers. The majority of farmers carry debt higher than what they can afford. The EPRDF regime has failed to redefine the land holding system since it assumed power in 1991. Land, the major capital resource of Ethiopian farmers, is administered under the premises of Stalinist cum Marxist Ideology. This has eroded farmers' confidence for a sustainable and long-term investment on the land.

Also the EPRDF follows a partisan agricultural development policy where the country's resources are siphoned to politically favored regions in the country. In those regions farmers are guaranteed minimum farm gate prices while neighboring regions are affected by fluctuating market prices. More importantly, huge government investments are made to such regions to develop irrigation infrastructures, promote improved seeds, fertilizers and farm tools. This type of preferential treatment of development planning bolstered the food production capability of farmers in those regions. Without doubt the terrain and agro climatic conditions of Tigraye region are unimaginably hostile to food production. In relative terms farmers in this province are more vulnerable to draughts, famine and hunger than the rest of the country. Over the past 14 years the region has become less vulnerable to the vagaries of nature. The development policy experiment in Tigraye demonstrates that famine and hunger are conquerable in the hostile terrains of Tigraye. With the right policy and a people friendly government that makes poverty alleviation and food self sufficiency a priority agendas of growth and development, hunger and famine are conquerable in the more traditionally productive landscapes of Ethiopia.

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<sup>1</sup> A response to Professor Levine's article on the above topic (May 30, 2006). The writer apologizes for the delay

<sup>2</sup> In this text famine and hunger interchangeably as the former is acute and the latter is chronic in nature.

International and donor organizations:

Ethiopia's agricultural development policies are prioritized on conditions sets by the WB and IMF whose long term interest is to make the poor poorer and the rich richer by creating a culture of dependency. These institutions of funding often disregard the basic needs and priorities of the Ethiopian people. A development agenda that sidelines people's interest is a recipe to disaster. There is no surprise that the WB/IMF hardly sites success stories of development in Ethiopia. The only success to be acknowledged is that the Bank continues to weaken the purchasing power of farmers through unfavorable terms of external trade and debt.

Moreover International humanitarian assistance has also undermined food production by flooding local markets with food aid and depressing food prices. Dumping large quantities of low-priced grain or other commodities can make it impossible for small farmers to compete in the marketplace. Similarly, UN and NGO programs remain short term relief oriented. They may have succeeded in saving lives, but not in eradicating famine and hunger. Relief and humanitarian programs have made people dependent on food aid by helping people get the fish instead of teaching the hungry how to fish.

Is population density a problem in Ethiopia:

Unplanned population growth is always a problem to any country. True population density and growth leads to social inequities thereby depriving the majority of the poor competing for meager resources. However, a high population growth rate is not in itself a determining factor for the cause of famine and hunger. Ethiopia has a population density of 64 persons per Km square<sup>3</sup>. Compared to China, Singapore, South Korea, India, Uganda, Pakistan, Netherlands, Japan, Nigeria, and South Africa whose density is in triple digits, Ethiopia remains lowest in density. Annual growth rate of 2.31% per year<sup>4</sup> is not higher than Niger (2.92%<sup>5</sup>), Afghanistan (2.67%)<sup>6</sup>, and Nigeria (2.38%)<sup>7</sup>. Sadly Ethiopia remains critically food deficient and prone to famine and hunger as a result of poor farming practices and wrong agricultural policy pursued by subsequent governments. Ethiopia ranks last in the use of irrigation, fertilizers, tractors and other improved technologies of the means of production. Since family labor is the most feasible and cost effective substitute to technological gaps, poor Ethiopians farmers opt for extended families. Therefore, the problem in Ethiopia's agriculture is not shortage of land but shortage of resources including money, training, and appropriate technology to develop the vast riches of the country. If the government of Ethiopia assures parents that their children would survive, parents could earn enough from their labor, state guaranteed support in old age then parents will easily see no need to extended family. In the absence of such policy, there is no doubt that overpopulation and extreme population density contribute to hunger but they are the determinant factors. If it were, we would expect to find widespread hunger in densely populated countries like Nigeria, Japan, China, S. Africa, South Korea, and the Netherlands and little or no hunger in sparsely populated countries like Sudan, Niger, Chad, and Zaire where malnutrition and hunger are widespread.

Is the physically cultivable land now completely cultivated:

Prof. Levine also said that larger families diminish agricultural output, since all land that is physically cultivable is now cultivated. Here we may need a definition for physically cultivable land. If Professor Levine refers to those lands within the reaches of farmers, then there will be no disagreement. Otherwise all land that is physically cultivable is not yet all cultivated. However, it is true that the physically cultivable land close to the domicile of subsistence farmers is cultivated. Most farmers in Ethiopia live in the highlands often for reasons of health, access and to some extent spare some land for agriculture. Farmers prefer to live near

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_population\\_density](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population_density)

<sup>4</sup> CIA-the World fact Book: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/fields/2002.html>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

their farms in the highlands. Typical of a developing country, Ethiopian farmer's major means of transport is either physical or pack animals. This means of transport is used to transport seeds, fertilizers, farm produce, and tools ('mofer', 'kenber'). Understandably, farmers cannot travel long distances to cultivate more arable land with heavy loads. Had there been improved means of transport they would have traveled longer distances to cultivate additional lands lying in the hinterland of the vast riches of the country. Cognizant those farmers are unable to walk long distance they are obliged to overuse land around their domicile. This does not construed that the physically cultivable land is completely cultivated or exhausted.

Is over use of land a problem:

Overuse of land by itself is not a wrong paradigm. At an average per capita holding of 0.3 ha, China has the most intensive and productive subsistence agriculture capable of feeding 1.3 billion people. On this smallholding a Chinese farmer is capable of feeding 4 members of his family and an additional five people. The miracle to china's agriculture is good agrarian policy which put great emphasis on irrigated agriculture. Currently 40% of China's cultivable land is irrigated allowing farmers to do multiple cropping annually. Despite the overuse of land by Chinese farmers, land fertility has been sustained for generations through proper crop rotation and use of appropriate farming technologies. In the US and Canada big commercial farmers have used their land excessively for more than 50 years. Yet they continue producing food grains with increased levels of production and productivity. Chinese and western farmers owe their success to proper government policy and use of appropriate farm technologies. In Ethiopia the means of production is rudimentary, multiple cropping and crop rotation is limited. Hence, per capita productivity remains low.

If Ethiopia had a government that puts agriculture development in the forefront of its development agenda, there is no reason why its farmers cannot feed 73 million people. In 1984 the Ministry of Agriculture of Ethiopia<sup>8</sup> reported that with proper incentives and farmer friendly policy five provinces: Gojjam, Gondar, Welega, Shewa and Arssi would suffice to feed Ethiopians on the land which Levine called overused.

Can hunger and famine be controlled in Ethiopia:

The answer to this question is a resounding YES. Controlling hunger and eliminating famine is absolutely possible. However, a number of things have to be in place to control it. Firstly, there should be a government that guarantees the interest of its people. Secondly, the nature of domicile of Ethiopian farmers needs some reorientation. It is difficult to imagine a successful rural development while Ethiopian farmers remain scattered. Genuine rural planning is required to bring settlers together. This helps government planners initiate an integrated rural development program. Irrigation, rural electrification, education, health and market services are better coordinated when people are organized to live in hamlets and not in scattered situations. Some may say this is a communist approach of planning. The answer to this argument is simple: the color of the cat is irrelevant as long it does the job. In real life urban and rural planning in the west follows the same pattern. The difference is western laws force people to settle in hamlets through market forces while eastern blocks use party directives to implement. The end product of both is the same.

Thirdly, the international community should help Ethiopia work on its priority agendas and not on those briefcase priorities crafted by WB/IMF and UNDP. Finally, Ethiopians in unison must demonstrate a commitment to "deny famine a future in Ethiopia". If the status quo of governance continues and if the international community remains insincere, famine and hunger calls the doomsday of Ethiopia.

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<sup>8</sup> Study on food self sufficiency in Ethiopia, Ministry of agriculture of Ethiopia, 1984 (in Amharic)

<sup>9</sup> In Dr. Gheladawdewos's stirring phrase