Abstract

The main objective of this work is to carry on an analysis about an important event which took place in Ethiopia in the mid-1980’s, 500 km north-east of Addis Ababa: the so called “Tana-Beles Resettlement Project”. The resettlement project, which affected part of the Ethiopian population, was planned by the local authorities, it was organized through fortyeight villages built on the left and right banks of the river Beles with five hundred households displaced in each village and it was aimed at reaching a balanced distribution of the population on the territory. The Tana-Beles resettlement was organized in the Metekel region in the Gojam province and was located between longitude 36°20-36°32 E and latitude 11°12’-11°21’ N.
The resettlement can be considered as the first government’s action aimed at facing the drought and consequent famine which were striking the population in those years (1984-1985), occupying new land free and fertile. According to the government’s declarations, the emergence resettlement scheme has been implemented in order to remove the peasants from famine affected areas, giving them the opportunity to reach a status of material well-being.\(^1\)

Behind this stated objective, it is important to highlight even those criticisms that came from many segments of the civil society during and after the implementation of the project, accusing the regime of exploiting the dramatic situation in order to obtain its political aim, i.e. the socialist transformation of the economic system, through the acceleration of the mechanization process and of the agricultural collective production system in the new lands.\(^2\)

The resettlement scheme drawn up by the Ethiopian regime was even the object of another strong criticism, through which the regime was guessed as guilty of deploying the project in order to weaken the political opposition in the country.\(^3\) As a matter of facts, most of the ethnic groups involved in the resettlement scheme were those which were strengthening, at that moment, the opposition against the military regime.

In the first section of the article I will focus my attention on the resettlement theory, while in the second I will emphasize the different consequences of the resettlement project developed in the Tana-Beles Valley, focusing my attention on the meeting between the resettled population and the host population (the Gumuz people) and on the dynamics of social and economic adaptation during resettlement in those lands considered virgin, unutilised and free.

In this first part it is important to point out the difference between a voluntary and an involuntary resettlement. The voluntary resettlement is based on “push” and “pull” factors, “push” elements that compel a group of people to abandon its place of origin, while “pull” factors encourage the voluntary move to a new location, introducing some expectations about a possible improvement of the quality of life in the new context. On the contrary, an involuntary resettlement is normally based only on “push” factors and, as a consequence, it is governed by a deep sense of dismay and by a strong feeling of insecurity in the resettled population. Another difference between the two categories of resettlement is based on the population involved: a voluntary resettlement usually consists of young families that move to a new location, maintaining their social connections with the place of origin, while an involuntary resettlement affects all components of a population and is marked by a dramatic process of migration, whose effects are destructive for the population displaced.\(^4\)


Involuntary resettlements present a higher level of complexity than the voluntary ones, because they consist of two problematic processes: the resettlement and the subsequent reconstruction of the livelihoods of the resettled populations. As for the involuntary resettlement, it is possible to highlight that this typology of displacement can differ according to the factor that underlies the process, that is the development or a disaster (e.g. famine or war). Development-induced resettlements arise from a political decision and are marked by their permanent character, while disaster-related resettlements are not planned as instruments aimed at achieving an improvement of the life conditions of a part of a population, being the product of destructive circumstances that affect a region. Furthermore, if we take into consideration the temporal aspect, it is possible to state that a disaster-related resettlement is not permanent and those people displaced return to their place of origin when the crisis comes to an end. The Ethiopian experience, that is the case study of the present article, is particularly interesting because it is an example of involuntary resettlement in which it is also possible to recognize a fusion of a disaster-related scheme with a development-induced one. Furthermore, it is a project conceived by the Ethiopian Government as permanent in nature and it is an example that helps the understanding of how tragic can be the social and economic consequences generating from an involuntary resettlement scheme that lacks in the process of rebuilding of the resettlers’ livelihoods.5

According to the scholar Michael M. Cernea, forced resettlements directed towards the achieving of development produce ethical questions. As a matter of fact compelled displacements inevitably fail in creating a balanced distribution of development’s benefits and losses and the impoverishment of many people emerges as the strongest negative result of involuntary resettlement schemes. Impoverishment, on which Cernea focused his attention, takes the shape of material and cultural loss, political tension and physical, social and economic exclusion. In order to attain a higher level of equality in the field of development, Cernea worked out an innovative model, “the impoverishment risks and reconstruction model for resettling displaced populations”, a model that analyses both the displacement and the reestablishment processes, whose an involuntary displacement is consisted of:6

The first interesting aspect of the model lies on the attention focused by the researcher on the components that structure the displacement, identified in the following elements: landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalisation, food insecurity, increased morbidity, loss of access to common property resources and community disarticulation. Cernea, pointing out these components, identifies all risks connected with the implementation of an involuntary resettlement program. In addition to this, the scholar further strengthened his approach by identifying those strategies useful to counterbalance the risks previously mentioned.7 As a consequence this model would encourage the government’s action in the right direction, suggesting the concrete steps to take in order to avoid a disaster in the implementation of an involuntary resettlement project.

5 Ibidem, p. 1468.
In this second part of the article I will analyse the Ethiopian experience in the resettlement field, focusing my attention on the Tana-Beles Valley resettlement scheme. The ethnic composition of the resettled population in the Metekel region was heterogeneous as people came from different parts of Ethiopia and composed of Amhara (from Wello, North Shoa, Gojjam and Gondar), Kam-baata, Hadiya, Oromo (from North Shoa and Wello), Wolaita, Alaba, Tigre, Agaw (from Wello-Tigray/Sekota), and a few Afar. Resettlers found a situation completely different from what they expected, according to the government’s promises. They tried to begin life in Tana-Beles Valley, a location where many incoming settlers contracted malaria, tuberculosis or other epidemic diseases, but most of them had not been capable of survive, because of a complex set of reasons, whose analysis is an important part of this article. The destruction of long entrenched social structures, together with the disruption of production systems have to be considered within the causes which brought to that disaster.7

After having stressed the composition of the resettled population and before developing the analysis of the resettlement project, it is important to notice that the Ethiopian Government said that the Tana-Beles Valley had been chosen as a resettlement area because it met a set of specific parameters. The Government stated:

“the new areas identified by a multi-disciplinary team are selected on the basis of the following: 1) suitability for human and animal habitation, 2) adequate and reliable rainfall, 3) fertile soil for production purposes, 4) sufficient water for human and animal consumption, 5) accessibility, and 6) availability of sufficient unscattered and unoccupied land”.8

The consequences, which followed the implementation of the project, will prove that those stated criteria didn’t correspond with the concrete. Resettlement in the Beles Valley threw the resettlers into a worse environment, if compared with their native one. From the environmental point of view, the resettlers had to cope with a totally different setting which was inhospitable, marked by the strong presence of malaria and other lowland diseases, and the resettlers’ cattle was affected by trypanosomiasis. As a consequence, many people died or deserted (desertions estimated to be 83.800 and deaths 32.800). It is possible to assert that a good sanitary program would have helped the incoming settlers to cope with the new diseases, partly still unknown to them; on the contrary the regime doesn’t arrange a plan and the resettled population falls of a new setting beyond its control. According to the results of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), the climatic worsening of the resettlement area - if compared with the climatic conditions of the resettlers’ place of origin - had been considered among the main reasons on which it is based the increasing rate of mortality among the resettled population. The RRC stated that the mortality rate in the Metekel region reached the level of 11%, while the

rates for resettlers in Keffa, Wollega and Illubabor were between 4.2 and 6.8%. However, according to two different analysis carried out by the researcher Giordano Sivini, who developed two lines of reasoning starting from two different hypothesis⁹, it would be possible to affirm that the real mortality rate in the Tana-Beles Valley for the resettlers would have ranged between 21.5 and 24%.¹⁰

Almost all resettlers came from high altitude regions where, according to the climatic conditions, it was possible to develop a mixed cultivation including also vegetables. Resettlers from the north of the country were cultivators of cereal crops and their basic food was injera (bread from teff grain), while the resettlers coming from the south-west generally cultivated enset and tuber crops and their main staple food was qotcho (made from the enset plant). In their native areas, land was small in size, the concept of private property was quite well developed and the household was the main unit of production and consumption. Moreover, a complex system of informal institutions governed reciprocity and redistribution in the field of agricultural production, in the social sphere and the members felt a deep sense of belongingness to the community.¹¹

As far as the food habits are concerned, it is possible to highlight a negative effect which disrupted the life of the resettlers; a strong impact is considered and underlined by the researcher Wolde-Selassie Abbute when he states that “the resettlers from South-West Ethiopia were unable to continue their intricate web of livelihoods based on the enset culture in the new location, because the climate is not convenient for growing enset and, as a result, all enset-related rituals became only a memory.”¹² This fact related with the modification of the previous food habits of the resettlers is the first step in the process of understanding how the displacement and the following resettlement scheme broke the system of relations and the way of life of the different ethnic groups involved. The Northern Ethiopian resettlers too were obliged to adjust to the kinds of food prepared from lowland crops.

The aim of the resettlement project was directed towards the achievement of surplus agricultural production, starting from the improvement of the mechanisation process and the introduction of a collective organization of the labour force. A main point to highlight pertains the fact that the resettlers had no freedom as far as the production process and the use of the products are concerned. Resettlers’ household economy in the agricultural sector was curtailed to the cultivation of the only 0.1 hectare of land given to each household.

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⁹ Further detailed information about the reasoning carried out by the researcher Sivini can be found in the following article: Sivini, Giordano. Famine and the Resettlement Program in Ethiopia. In Africa, Vol. 41 (1986), pp. 211-242.


¹² Ibidem, cit., p. 169.
From the social point of view, the village communities were disarticulated and the different bonds of relationships of the community, i.e. the land exchange, the religious beliefs, the kinships and the neighbourhood, had been broken. As a matter of fact the resettlers of the villages had different ethnic and religious backgrounds and had lost their specific community village institutions, such as idir and other religious and secular mutual organizations. Idir, known as seera among the Southern resettlers, was the most strong mutual association of the village communities and carried out many functions, e.g. the burial, the mourning and the transportation of the sick to the hospital; idir were administered by an elected wise and respected dagna (chief), and those who did not contribute to the funds of the institution were severely punished. An analysis of the new religious environment highlights the disruption of the resettlers’ previous way of life. In the new context religious beliefs and practices were limited and the roles of ritual leaders and priests were undermined. Moreover, resettlers practiced marriage without the common ceremonies and the role of respected elders and religious leaders in the process of marriage has been consequently disrupted. The executive and judicial duties concerning the administration of the village have been transferred from the elders to the elected Peasant Association Committee and the other vital roles of the elders have been lost: as a matter of fact, in the previous setting, elders had a role in settling disputes, they punished those guilty of a specific violation according to customs, they taught the importance of accepted values and norms and, in addition to this, they even visited the weak and disabled, assisted the family of the deceased in facing the grief and performed other fundamental social services too.  

Another aspect to stress concerns the break-up of families caused by the resettlement project; according to the Italian sociologist and anthropologist Gabriele Sospiro’s observations, men abandoned their wives in the first phase when they opted for the project in order to remain with their family or in the second phase, after having experienced the bitter resettlement.

The Italian Government played a significant role after the implementation of the Beles Valley resettlement scheme. In March 1986, in the framework of the Development Cooperation, it funded the “Tana-Beles Project”, whose aim was the achieving of economic self-sufficiency and surplus for the valley. In order to attain this purpose it introduced irrigated agriculture, implemented rain-fed agriculture and built some infrastructure. In the villages, the positive results focused on the access to facilities, i.e. potable water, grain stores, grain mills with generators, a malaria eradication center, clinics, new iron-roofed houses and primary schools. However, apart from these positive results about the improvement of the life in the different villages, a strong negative assessment must be pointed out, starting from the analysis of the results of the research project carried on by Wolde-Selassie Abbute. The researcher states

“That the project’s highly mechanized technology and capital intensive cooperative agricultural development approach was not appropriate to the attainment of self-sufficiency and that, being highly centralized, decision making was top-down with massive

13 Ibidem, pp. 102-112.
intervention leading to imposed socio-economic change relying mainly on the strategy of collective production. In addition, the bandout mentality created dependency and undermined resettlers’ own efforts to achieve self-reliance”.

Some resettlers’ sentences express this sense of dependency on the help, clear when they state:

“It has been a long time since help has stopped, we do not know why. Even in agriculture, before, they gave land already plowed and cultivated to those who did not have oxen, and then one went to harvest. Now we must do it all ourselves. But now we have nothing. … Before there were tractors and other materials. And now, since last year, they said we have to do everything alone, they said if you want to plow the fields you need to pay. And for this now there is no longer any help; therefore, whoever has the strength cultivates, who does not dies of hunger. … If the government had given every farmer an ox, everyone would have been able to work.”

At this point of the analysis of the Tana-Beles Resettlement Project, it is important to focus our attention on the strong effects the project had on the native population, the Gumuz ethnic group. Ten of thousands of resettlers, coming from many Ethiopian regions, met the native population and, as a consequence, the last one was forced into a deep transformation concerning the space occupied, where it had developed its own social and cultural system. The Gumuz used to lead a quite different socio-economic and cultural way of life as opposed to the one practiced in the areas of the highland peasants and they are also different in their dark black colour. The difference concerning the socio-economic way of life, together with the marginalization and expropriation of resources that belonged to them by tradition, produced bitter ethnic conflicts that caused loss of lives from both sides. This can be considered as the most tragic experience which affected both the native and the resettlers, brought about by a resettlement scheme contrary to their previous better secured way of life.

The economical system in the Beles Valley emphasizes the differences between the Gumuz, whose economy was structured on a subsistence system and the resettlers, individuals who had already developed economic transactions belonging more to the differentiated functions society rather than to the segmented one. In the new setting, the different conception of the land, expressed by the two groups, became one of the fundamental reasons at the ground of the war between the natives and the resettlers. A member of the Gumuz ethnic group states:


16 Interview carried out by the Italian researcher Gabriele Sospiro. The research has been carried out from December 1993 and January 1995. Five interviews for each ethnic group has been carried out. Every household was the main subject of the interview and the chief interviewed are almost all males (96%), prevailing the youth age (56% is between 20 and 29 years old; 81% is under 39, and only 2% is over 60). The duration of the interviews ranges from thirty minutes to two hours and the total amount of them is 45.

“With the resettlers the war was for the land. Nobody has its own land. The land is big and everybody works together without saying this is mine and this is yours. At the harvest time we share the fruits of our work. This is the rule in Gumuz people. They want all the land. Every Gumuz was free to farm where he wanted, but, after their arrival, we have forgotten the meaning of peace.”

A remark on the question of dependency, previous analysed, must be considered now, as we are dealing with the negative effects the resettlement had on the natives. The sentences pronounced by some members of the Gumuz ethnic group explain distinctly the deep sense of dependency; they affirmed concepts such as “in the economy we are backward and we want the government help” and communication, in the economic system normally oriented towards the dichotomy connected with paying or not paying, turns in the Beles Valley into a new framework, the dichotomy between having access to help or not having access to help.

After having focused the attention on the consequences of the Tana-Beles resettlement scheme, it is possible to consider the program as a tragic failure. The project lacked of a previous analysis concerning the resettlers and the host population and it was wanting even in the necessary knowledge of previous international experiences of resettlement, thanks to whose it would have been probably possible to avoid some operational errors. The Derg Government, showing lack of concern, focused its attention only on the achieving of its political aim, the development of the agricultural collectivisation process; in order to attain this objective, it encouraged the infrastructural development of the Metekel region, without considering at all fundamental issues, i.e. the disintegration of the original social networks, disrupted by the forced displacement, the integration of the Tana-Beles Valley in the economic region and the economic and social sustainability of the households. The Derg Government didn’t take into consideration even the possible deterioration of the relationships between the resettlers and the host population over the land use, important issue that would have required a previous plan, defining the way to follow in order to solve a hypothetical conflict.

The resettlers in the Tana-Beles Valley tried to cope with many difficulties of adaptation, most of them failed in achieving this objective and many incoming settlers finally decided to abandon the Beles Valley; the dimension of the displaced population dropped from 82.106 in 1987 to 26.660 in 1993. Moreover, in the 1991 the Derg regime fell, a new coalition Government led by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) seized power and, after this political change, ethnic conflicts developed in many resettlement areas, even in the Tana-Beles Valley, thus increasing the political insecurity in a deeply problematic area.

The Tana-Beles resettlement project analysed in this article must foster the

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18 Interview carried out by the Italian researcher Gabriele Sospiro
19 Interview carried out by the Italian researcher Gabriele Sospiro.
thinking on the resettlement issue and on its possible consequences, in a period in which governments fall back on resettlement projects in order to match the objective of development for a specific region of their country. Notwithstanding the innovative models developed by international scholars in the resettlement field of research, it is important to highlight that the choice to implement a resettlement project must be the product of a careful reasoning, identifying the risks and possible consequences of the planned displacement, in particular in terms of self-sustainability of the households and of the potential impact on the social and cultural relations entrenched between the people in their place of origin.

The last consideration I would like to point out should be regarded as a boost to an investigation to carry out in the Tana-Beles Valley nowadays, more than twenty-five years after the implementation of the resettlement scheme. Such a kind of investigation could help to fill the current gap of scientific knowledge about the developments that followed the past displacement and could be interesting from an anthropological point of view, giving the opportunity to study the following adaptation of those resettlers that decided not to abandon the region after the failure of the project.

**Interviews**

All the interviews mentioned have been carried out by Dr. Gabriele Sospiro and they have been provided by Dr. Prof. Antonio Palmisano during the lecture “Development Anthropology” given at the University of Trieste in the first semester of the academic year 2010/2011.
Bibliography


