

DAM AND SUGAR PLANTATIONS YIELD STARVATION AND DEATH IN ETHIOPIA'S LOWER OMO VALLEY



The Oakland Institute

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International headlines about Ethiopia in recent months have focused on the civil war waged in and around the northern region of Tigray since 2020. What has gone ignored is the severe humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Omo Valley – a UNESCO World Heritage Site – as a result of failed “development” projects. The establishment of the Gibe III Dam and the Kuraz Sugar Development Project (KSDP), a large-scale sugar plantation, has wreaked havoc on the lives of the Indigenous communities – including the Kwegu, Mursi, Bodi, Suri, Daasanach, Nyangatom, and Hamar. This report alerts on the severe humanitarian crisis faced by the Kwegu, Bodi, and Mursi tribes, who have seen their traditional livelihoods and environment destroyed by these projects. The situation is rapidly deteriorating as tribe members die of disease and starvation.

“At this moment we have no bush to collect fruits. The number of fish is minimized from the river, there is no animal to hunt. We are in danger of starvation and additionally we are dying of an unknown epidemic disease.”

– A KWEGU VILLAGER IN ETHIOPIA’S LOWER OMO VALLEY



Mursi children and woman suffering from severe malnutrition at the Hana Health Center, October 2022. The humanitarian crisis, which was already dire, has steadily deteriorated in recent years.



INTRODUCTION

The Omo Valley is a popular tourist attraction. People from around the world travel to experience what the government of Ethiopia advertises as “one of the only places in the world where you can still find Indigenous people that haven’t been influenced by the outside world [...] and who all staunchly keep to their unique traditional costumes, customs, and beliefs.”¹ The extremely dire conditions faced by the Kwegu, Bodi, and Mursi, however, remain overlooked.

Despite the urgent need for humanitarian assistance, the government and relief agencies have so far failed to respond to calls for help. World Vision distributed bags of wheat in November 2022, but this aid is far from sufficient to cover the need and it is unclear if it will continue.

Tackling the crisis in the Lower Omo Valley requires immediate and sustained humanitarian assistance, along with decisive government action to address its root causes – largely tied to the devastating impact of the so-called “development” projects in the region.

Is Help Coming?

“We are facing a big life challenge. We have no more flood retreat cultivation because it is blocked by the Omo River dams. We have no cattle to survive. Our bush cabbages are cleared by sugar factories. [There] is not any place to shift and try to cultivate. We never get any support from the government. Our life depends on fishing, hunting, bush fruit collecting, and flood cultivation. At this moment we have no bush to collect fruits from. The number of fish in the river is minimized, there is no animal to hunt. We are in danger of starvation and additionally, we are dying of an unknown epidemic disease. Over the last two years, more than 15 Kwegu people died of cholera. Our problems are increasing day by day. We try to cultivate near the sugarcane plantation but guards sent by the sugar factory warned us that we needed to clear the area, or else they threatened to burn our homes near the river. No one is helping us. Please tell anyone who can help solve our problems. Please, if help doesn’t come, our people will disappear from the valley.”

– A KWEGU VILLAGER



Bags of wheat delivered by World Vision to a Kwegu village, November 9, 2022.

GROWING HUNGER: THE GIBE III DAM AND SUGAR PLANTATIONS

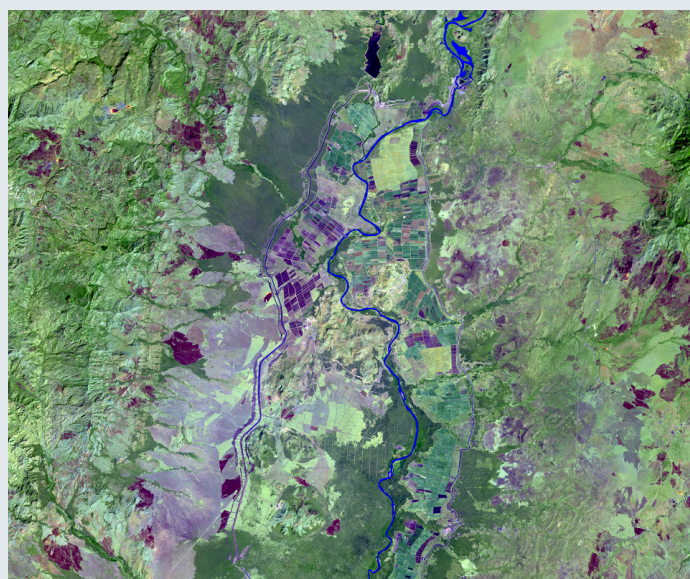
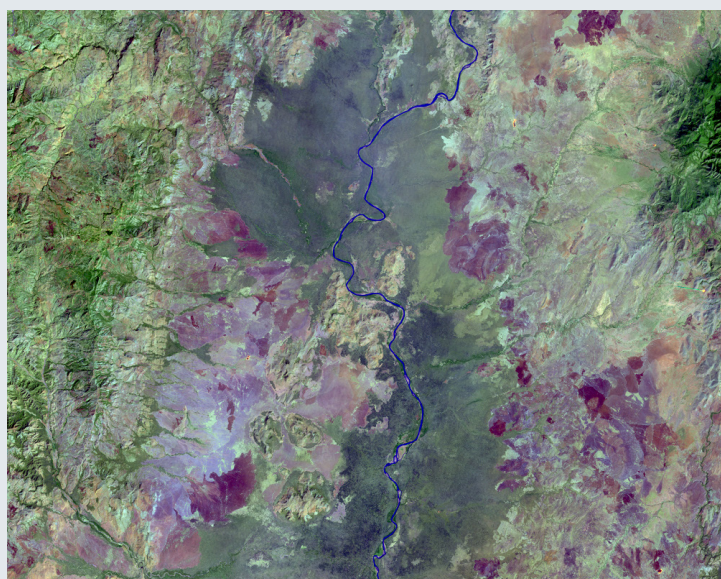
The Lower Omo Valley is home to numerous Indigenous groups – predominantly pastoralists, hunter-gatherers, and flood-retreat cultivators. Their identity, culture, and livelihoods are intimately linked with the plains and snaking Omo River – relying significantly on its annual flood for the cultivation of crops, fishing, and grazing of cattle.

In 2006, the government, then led by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), embarked on the construction of the Gibe III Dam to increase Ethiopia’s energy potential and establish large-scale irrigated plantations, with the goal to “transform” the region.² In 2011, it initiated the Kuraz Sugar Development Project (KSDP), comprised of a massive sugarcane plantation and five associated factories, located downstream from the dam.

Since inception, the Gibe III Dam and KSDP have severely deteriorated the livelihoods of Indigenous communities in

the region – wiping out livestock, driving mass displacement, and decimating local communities’ ability to make a living – leading to widespread hunger.³ For years, the Oakland Institute has raised the alarm about this impact but no action appears to have been taken to mitigate the consequences of projects that were supposed to bring development.⁴

One of the most severe consequences of the Gibe III Dam – completed in 2015 – is the loss of the annual flood of the Omo River. For centuries, this flood has been at the core of food production for Indigenous communities and a key component of their economies. Since the dam started generating power in 2015, the annual flood has not occurred.⁵ Local communities are increasingly dependent on the fickle rains for bush cultivation and the sale of their cattle to buy grain. Locals have been forced to resettle and abandon practices like herding cattle that were essential to their livelihoods.



Satellite imagery of the Lower Omo Valley from 2011 and 2019 showing the extent to which sugar plantations have taken over the land near the Omo River. The plantations are the rectangular shapes near the Omo River. Source: United States Geological Survey, <https://eros.usgs.gov/media-gallery/earthshot/sugar-plantations>

DEVASTATED BY “DEVELOPMENT” PROJECTS

Seven years after the completion of the dam and eleven years since the first plantations were established, the harsh reality of hunger and disease on the ground confirms their disastrous long-term impacts on the region, threatening the survival of Indigenous tribes.

One of the groups hit the hardest, the Kwegu – people who have occupied this land since time immemorial – are a 2,000-strong band of Omo-flood cultivators, hunters and gatherers, and goat herders. Their territory is adjacent to both the Omo River and a sugarcane plantation. Prior to the dam, they lived at the Omo year-round. The Kwegu used to fish, eat wild game and a large variety of wild plants, and collect wild honey.

The Kwegu’s territory intermixes with the Bodi and Mursi, two other Indigenous groups who are also suffering greatly from the projects. The Bodi number around 10,000.⁶ They are cattle herders and have traditionally cultivated along the Omo River after the seasonal floods, while also practicing rain-fed cultivation in the bush. The Bodi’s neighbors to the south are the Mursi, who also number around 10,000.⁷ The Mursi have very similar livelihoods. They too are cattle herders and practice both flood-retreat cultivation on the Omo and rain-fed cultivation in the plains.

Unable to practice flood retreat cultivation, the Kwegu, Bodi, and Mursi communities have lost their lands, livelihoods, and food sources to the Gibe III Dam and irrigation schemes. They are chronically hungry.





District doctors recently visited Mursi villages, but lacked the time, fuel, or supplies to make a tangible difference, January 2023.



A Mursi boy with Leishmania, July 2021.

Losing to Disease and Malnutrition

The situation has severely deteriorated in recent years. 22 Mursi villagers died of malnutrition near the Mago checkpoint in October 2022.⁸ Locals estimate that every family in the area has lost two or three children to malnutrition and leishmania. Some fear that half of the Mursi population could die from malnutrition in the absence of urgent action.⁹ In October 2022, eight people were brought from the checkpoint to the Hana Health Center, where all but one subsequently died, including a pregnant woman.¹⁰ The lack of transportation to get people in critical condition from the bush to Jinka, a town with medical facilities, is a pressing issue.¹¹ The lack of basic health services locally is dire given so many people are in critical need of care and the fact that many villagers do not want to leave, because they fear of dying during the travel or at the hospital, far away from their community.

Currently, the Kwegu and Mursi are suffering from an outbreak of chickenpox. Additionally, they are also experiencing a measles outbreak, which started in 2021. The Mursi are most impacted – villagers report that 40 Mursi children have died from the disease.¹² Mursi children are also struck by malaria and leishmania. In addition to this, cholera has appeared in the area since 2020.



Kwegu woman suffering from chickenpox, October 2022.



Contaminated Water Brings Cholera and Dangerous Chemicals

Research shows that cholera has spread through the local communities since January 2020, with the earliest outbreaks reported in a Kwegu village, which obtains its water from a tributary of the Omo River.¹³ A worker camp and a military detachment situated upstream of the river had been releasing raw sewage directly into the tributary, leading to 200 people falling sick and 23 people dying the following week.¹⁴ Having gone four years without a harvest from the riverbanks, local communities were experiencing grave hunger; when cholera arrived, their immune systems were already weakened, leaving them vulnerable to the disease.¹⁵ Cholera has continued to spread, causing the death of over 15 Kwegu, 20 Bodi, and 12 Mursi in the past two years.¹⁶

Water contamination tied to the sugar plantations and factories' toxic chemical use is another concern, which the villagers allege is poisoning their drinking water.¹⁷ The threat to drinking water has been confirmed by several studies conducted in the region which show that sugarcane cultivation is heavily dependent on chemical inputs like pesticides and fertilizers, with sugarcane processing plants producing large amounts of runoff that can contain heavy metals and cleaning agents.¹⁸ This raises grave concerns over the Omo River's water quality, compounded by the fact that there is no water testing or treatment available. Community members report that they are forced to drink from chemical-filled irrigation canals, which poses significant long-term health risks, including cancers, neurodegenerative disorders, and reproductive harms.¹⁹ Most tribe members, however, are unaware of the dangers posed by the dirty runoff water or chemicals, and thus continue to be exposed to these health risks.²⁰ Not only are the Bodi and Kwegu impacted from this contamination, but also other communities living downstream from the river.²¹

Failure of Resettlement Sites

"Development" projects have forced local tribe members to resettle and abandon livestock herding.²² The Mursi and the Bodi were promised irrigated land in resettlement sites where they would be able to grow crops, schools, access to health care, grinding mills, food aid, safe water, and access to electricity in the resettlement sites.²³ Little to none of this ever materialized, causing communities to abandon resettlement sites.²⁴ In Hana, the resettlement sites are virtually empty with no government services.

In a case reported to the researchers, when a sugar factory encroaching on Bodi and Kwegu territory was constructed, the owners of the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation prepared a piece of land for the two groups, with irrigation canals to allow for the cultivation of corn.²⁵ After community members had cultivated the land for two years, the factory owners abruptly took it back and gave them another small parcel of dry, rocky land – far away from water sources, rendering cultivation impossible. The Bodi and Kwegu have attempted to cultivate crops near the sugarcane plantation, but these efforts were thwarted by employees of the sugar factory, who have cleared and destroyed these crops.²⁶ Bodi villagers have reportedly needed to direct water from the canal into their fields at night, because workers of the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation have banned them from using it during daytime.²⁷

Menial Jobs for the Locals

Locals have been left with no choice but to work for the sugar factories.²⁸ Despite the promise that KSDP would bring jobs, the few made available to the Kwegu, Mursi, and Bodi are low-paid, menial, and seasonal – primarily consisting of hunting buffalo that eat the sugarcane for the men and removing crushed sugarcane refuse for the women.²⁹

These jobs pay between 400 to 1,500 birr (US\$7-US\$28) per month.³⁰ This exceedingly low sum is further devalued amidst the prevalent inflation rate in Ethiopia –at over 30 percent.³¹ A quintal of maize that would feed a family for a month is now sold for more than 3,000 birr (US\$56).³² In order to survive, the Bodi and Kwegu sell charcoal to people in nearby towns or plantation workers, buying bread for their children on a day-to-day basis with the money they earn.³³

"The sugar factory people pay [Kwegu villagers] 700 birr per month to work, but being in semi-voluntary slavery for US\$13 per month is not what anyone would choose. If we could be given a little of our land back to cultivate, that would be huge."

– NAME WITHHELD FOR SECURITY CONCERNS



Loss of Cattle, Wild Game, & Fish

With the Indigenous losing most of their land to the dam and sugar plantations, over half of their cattle have perished in recent years.³⁴ And the crisis continues today with cattle dying of malnutrition and various illnesses such as tuberculosis, anthrax, and pasteurellosis.³⁵ The Mursi and Bodi are not provided medicine for their cattle and feel that this is an intentional attempt to get rid of the cattle.³⁶

The wild game that the Indigenous relied on for subsistence has also disappeared – having fled or died due to the loss of habitat to the sugar plantations.³⁷ Moreover, having been disarmed by the military, locals lack the arms to hunt.³⁸



Additionally, it has become increasingly difficult to catch fish.³⁹ Research shows that this may be due to the loss of the annual Omo floods, which generated fish migration and replenished the river-fed lakes.⁴⁰ Significant reductions in the productivity of flood-plain fisheries are often detected following the construction of dams in numerous river basins across the world.⁴¹ The reduction in the number of fish may also partly be due to overfishing, as more people turn to it given the loss of other livelihoods.⁴² In addition, men from urban areas are coming in and fishing commercially with nets.⁴³

These different factors have reportedly forced villagers to eat bush leaves in order to survive, while others go hungry because they cannot find anything to subsist on at all.



FORGOTTEN AMIDST THE COUNTRY’S CIVIL WAR

In April 2018, there was hope that change in the Omo Valley might be possible as Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister with a reform agenda emphasizing human rights and *medemer* – an Amharic word for coming together and synergy – across the country.⁴⁴

After taking office, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed set out to break the power and influence of the TPLF, which had dominated national politics for almost three decades. This fueled tensions, leading the TPLF to retreat to its stronghold in the northern region of Tigray.⁴⁸ In September 2020, tension culminated when Tigrayans held local elections in defiance of federal orders, following the postponing of long-promised national elections.⁴⁹ Two months later, violence broke out, gradually escalating into a brutal civil war known as the Tigray War.⁵⁰ For the past two years, the conflict has left an unknown number dead, forced over two million people from their homes, and driven parts of Ethiopia into famine.⁵¹ On November 2, 2022, the Ethiopian government and TPLF leadership signed an agreement to stop fighting.⁵²

With international coverage focused on the war in the North, conflicts in the Lower Omo Valley have gone almost entirely unreported. In 2019, military forces carried out indiscriminate killings in the region, leaving at least 38 people dead – including women, children, and the elderly – gang raping women, and forcing community members to go into hiding.⁵³ Among Mursi people, similar devastation occurred, with reports of houses set on fire, beatings, and torture.⁵⁴ Following this campaign of violence, the Bodi and most of the Mursi population were disarmed. Given all of the neighboring groups are still armed, this leaves the Bodi and Mursi more vulnerable to cattle raids as well as general abuses by local administrators and the military.⁵⁵



Soldiers in Kibbish, Lower Omo, July 2012.

TPLF AND THE OMO VALLEY “DEVELOPMENT” PROJECTS

The Gibe III Dam and KSDP sugar plantation projects in the Lower Omo Valley were both led by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) until 2018. The military-run Metals and Engineering Corporation (MetEC) – a large military-industrial conglomerate controlled by the TPLF – was responsible for building the first sugar factory, Omo Kuraz I, while the military was also involved in the setup of plantations.⁴⁵ Since the early days of the project, widespread human rights abuses have been reported, including forced evictions, the plowing of ripening crops, beatings, rape, and indiscriminate killings by the military. Following Prime Minister Abiy coming into power, the MetEC was accused of corruption, with charges of squandering US\$2.8 billion on ten sugarcane factories, none of which were ever finished. In late 2018, 29 MetEC officials were arrested on corruption charges, including the former director general Kife Dagne.⁴⁶ Holding the MetEC accountable, the current government removed it from high-profile projects like the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). It also split the conglomerate into two branches (one military and one civilian), thus dramatically decreasing its standing within Ethiopia’s economy, in an effort to reduce the amount of financing available to the TPLF.⁴⁷



CALL FOR ACTION TO TACKLE THE CRISIS

In November 2022, Ethiopia's warring sides agreed to cease hostilities, potentially paving the way for peace. It is urgent for the government to now turn its attention to the Omo Valley and address the harms suffered by Indigenous communities.

Despite the severity of the situation, the regional and national governments have failed to take action. More than a decade after their inception, it is clear that the "development" projects in the Omo Valley have massively failed the Indigenous communities. Humanitarian aid is urgently needed now to stop widespread hunger and provide adequate medical aid. In the immediate term, the Ethiopian government must take steps to address this devastating situation and end the suffering, by ensuring food, water, and medical assistance are provided. The government must also address past abuses and take all appropriate measures to mitigate the impacts of the projects, including returning arable land back to communities. Only this will usher in a new era – one that benefits and includes Indigenous communities, traditions, cultures, and livelihoods.

Indigenous tribes of the Omo Valley must be respected, allowed to live in dignity, and supported to have their land and livelihoods restored.



Kwegu fishing in the Omo River, 2012



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