

# “Do Our Bodies Know Their Ways?” Villagization, Food Insecurity, and Ill-Being in Ethiopia’s Lower Omo Valley

Edward G. J. Stevenson and Lucie Buffavand

**Abstract:** This article investigates food security and well-being in the context of “development-forced displacement” in Ethiopia. In the lower Omo, a large hydro-electric dam and plantation schemes have forced people to cede communal lands to the state and business speculators, and indigenous communities have been targeted for resettlement in new consolidated villages. The authors carried out a food access survey in new villages and in communities not yet subjected to villagization and complemented this with ethnographic research carried out over a period of four years. The results of the two methodological approaches were inconsistent. The survey data suggest that household food access was poor in both places but better in villagization sites than in the other communities. The ethnographic research, however, suggests that village settlers were unable to feed themselves from the irrigated plots they were allotted and were therefore dependent on food aid. They spoke of indignity, bodily discomfort, and the severance of meaningful social relations. This article discusses the contrast between the information generated by the different research methods and asks how this tension relates to two major narratives about development: development as a process through which the state actualizes a national dream, and development as a process that creates affluence for some by impoverishing others.

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**Résumé:** Cet article étudie la sécurité alimentaire et le bien-être dans le contexte du « déplacement forcé par le développement » en Éthiopie. Dans la basse vallée de l'Omo, un grand barrage hydroélectrique ainsi que des projets de plantation ont obligé les habitants à céder des terres communales à l'État et à des spéculateurs commerciaux. Les communautés autochtones ont été ciblées pour être réinstallées dans de nouveaux villages consolidés. Les auteurs ont effectué une enquête sur l'accès à la nourriture dans les nouveaux villages et dans des communautés qui n'ont pas encore été soumises à la villagisation et ils ont complété l'étude avec des recherches ethnographiques réalisées sur une période de quatre ans. Les résultats des deux approches méthodologiques étaient contradictoires. Les données de l'enquête suggèrent que l'accès des ménages à la nourriture était médiocre dans les deux cas, mais meilleur dans les sites de villagisation que dans les autres communautés. La recherche ethnographique, cependant, suggère que les habitants des nouveaux villages ne parvenaient pas à se nourrir avec les parcelles irriguées qui leur avaient été attribuées et qu'ils dépendaient de l'aide alimentaire. Ils parlèrent d'indignité, d'inconfort corporel et de rupture de relations sociales significatives. L'article traite du contraste entre les informations générées par les différentes méthodes de recherche et interroge le rapport entre cette tension et les deux discours majeurs sur le développement: le développement en tant que processus par lequel l'État réalise un rêve national et le développement en tant que processus qui enrichi certains par l'appauvrissement des autres.

**Keywords:** Resettlement; displacement; food security; poverty; well-being; ecological change; research methods; Ethiopia

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## Introduction

It is unsettling. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, some two hundred million people were displaced by development projects worldwide, forced into leaving their homes for somewhere new (Cernea 2009). For those who have not experienced such things, understanding the experience of displacement is challenging. In this study of Ethiopia's lower Omo Valley, we use qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate the experiences of people displaced by one development project in Ethiopia. Household survey and ethnographic data appear at first to tell very different stories: people living in resettlement sites, who were largely dependent on food aid at the time of our research, reported less intense experiences of food insecurity than those in communities reliant on their own farms and herds. Ethnography, on the other hand, showed that people in the new villages found life much harder there than in their former homes. They experienced a profound disruption: their sense of well-being suffered, and their confidence in their ability to feed themselves in the future was diminished.

How can these two contrasting images be reconciled? And how do they relate to the major narratives that surround dam and plantation development projects in Africa—development as a process through which a

beleaguered state redeems itself and actualizes a national dream, or development as a euphemism for a form of violent, primitive accumulation that creates affluence for some by impoverishing others? As Abbink (2012) has noted, these narratives seem to be incommensurable: there is a tendency to focus *either* on the interests of the nation-state *or* those of local communities.

In this article we investigate how this polarization of focus is possible by analyzing the case of river basin development and social engineering in the lower Omo. We begin by acknowledging that research may privilege one or another narrative by focusing on a specific level of analysis, the nation-state or the local community. Further, the methods that scholars use may also speak more clearly to one narrative over another: metrics of economic productivity or food security may resonate more strongly with narratives of state development partly because they are the currencies by which such development is conventionally measured. Ethnographic work, on the other hand, can uncover alternative systems of value that are not easily converted into the terms used by outsiders. It can also shed light on forms of livelihood and sociality for which surveys are ill-suited. Without ethnography we would have found it difficult to recognize the inappropriate assumptions built into the food security questionnaire employed in this study.

Equally important is the body of literature that informs the interpretation of data. In the case of the lower Omo, the social science literature on resettlement is particularly relevant. Systematic study of resettled communities, as opposed to the more settled communities that have constituted the traditional focus of anthropologists, may be traced to Elizabeth Colson's work in Zambia, which began in the late 1950s. Her studies of resettlement associated with the Kariba dam were among the first to consider the social impacts of displacement for entire communities and to theorize about the processes of rupture that massive resettlement schemes entailed (Colson 1971). As the number of people displaced by dam and infrastructure development schemes grew over the course of the twentieth century, a large body of literature accumulated on the phenomenon of resettlement (McDowell 1996; de Wet 2006). "Development-induced displacement" is sometimes used as a synonym for resettlement, but the absence of any meaningful consultation prior to the implementation of most such schemes means that these situations may be more accurately described as "development-*forced* displacement." As Cernea has noted, "'induced' is not an appropriate term for a process that is determined by fiat, decided and planned out in advance" (cited by Oliver-Smith 2010:2).

For our purposes, programs of "development-*forced* displacement" may be usefully divided into three types. The first type, villagization, involves moving people who live in dispersed settlements into large, government-designed villages. Such programs of village regrouping, or forcing people to move into "model villages," were employed both by colonial administrations, for example in Egypt (Mitchell 1988), and by post-colonial states, for example in Tanzania (Ndagala 1982). Rarely did these programs go

according to plan. In Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), a policy of moving rural communities into amalgamated settlements was abandoned after it resulted in famine and food shortages in 1909 (Kay 1967). In Ethiopia, the Derg military government proposed to villagize the entire rural population as part of a program of agricultural collectivization in the late 1970s (A. Pankhurst 1992). Although the policy was changed after the famine of 1984, the communities that had been subjected to villagization experienced social disruption, obstacles to efficient livestock management, and hazards related to increased population density—for example increased risks of diarrheal diseases (H. Pankhurst 1992; Tadesse 2002).

Another type of resettlement is based on the premise that moving people from areas of higher to lower population density will help prevent famine, as it makes possible more efficient use of underutilized lands. In Ethiopia, at least a million people were resettled on this basis between 1980 and 2010. The lands in question were invariably occupied already by people for whom the arrival of newcomers was a shock, and return migration was not uncommon (A. Pankhurst 1991, 2009). Placed in historical perspective, these programs can be seen as part of a longer process of state-making in Ethiopia, involving the political incorporation of the southern lowlands by peoples from the Christian highlands in the north—they represent one of the major continuities in the history of the Ethiopian state and its relationship to the peoples on its periphery (Donham & James 1986; Markakis 2011).

The third type of resettlement involves both displacement and changes to land tenure and ecological circumstances brought about by infrastructure projects such as dams, highways, and irrigation schemes. In Ethiopia, the earliest major scheme of this kind occurred in the Awash Valley in the northeast of the country, where, beginning in the 1950s, a series of hydroelectric dams was built to provide electricity for Addis Ababa and to facilitate the irrigation of new cotton and sugar plantations (Ayalew & Getachew 2009). These projects served the interests of the state and of investors by providing them with access to large amounts of resources that were used by the peoples of the region, but that had previously remained outside of national accounts (Behnke & Kerven 2013). They raised major challenges for Afar and Oromo pastoralists who had used the floodplains of the Awash for dry season grazing. Kloos (1982) estimated that the irrigation schemes displaced twenty thousand people, who at the same time faced heightened competition for resources with the estimated 150,000 farm laborers, mostly migrants from the highlands, who settled near the plantations. When rains failed in 1973, the result was famine for many among the Afar and Oromo who no longer had any fall-back options.

What is happening currently in the lower Omo Valley combines elements of all three of the types of displacement described above, and poses risks to food security at least as great as those created by the Awash projects. The scheme in the lower Omo was planned and executed by the current regime in Ethiopia in collaboration with the Italian engineering firm Salini, international financiers, and a variety of investors who sought to profit from

sugar and cotton estates irrigated by the waters of the Omo.<sup>1</sup> To get a sense of the human impacts of this scheme, we designed a study that would (1) compare food access in villagization sites to food access in communities that had not yet been subject to resettlement, and (2) investigate the impacts of ongoing changes on well-being as locally understood. Food access is taken to mean the ability to acquire sufficient food at a given time (Maxwell & Smith 1992). This is one component of food security, which refers to a state in which there is a low risk of food shortage due to poverty, “crop failure, natural or other disasters” (United Nations 1975:14). Food security may itself be considered as a component of the larger domain of well-being, which implies the experience of pleasure, or partaking in what is good in life. Well-being is often associated with participation in meaningful daily routines (Weisner 2009); its opposite, ill-being, refers to suffering, isolation, and disruption (Narayan et al. 2000).

The combination of methods employed in this study reflects our backgrounds as anthropologists trained respectively in a more quantitative or positivist and a more qualitative or ethnographic style of research. The collaboration has been instructive: it has helped us recognize how different research methods point us towards different interpretive frameworks. The quantitative household survey provided a simple answer to the question of how food access differed between the new villages and a comparison community (“food security is lower in the comparison community”). The ethnographic work focused on the challenges that villagization posed to livelihoods and well-being—components of the larger domain of which food security is a part. Ethnography not only provided a different answer to the question of what impact villagization has on food security, but forced us to reconsider the terms of the question: Can people be considered “food secure” when they are dependent on food aid for their survival? It also raised entirely new questions: Could people’s lives be said to have been improved, when well-being in their own terms has plummeted? And if people are not committed to living in planned settlements, and maintain home bases elsewhere in addition to the resettlement sites, can “villagization” be said to be happening at all?

In the body of this article we provide an account of how villagization in the lower Omo was conceived by the planners. We then describe the methods used to investigate how villagization was experienced by the affected population. We take particular care to explain the procedures involved in carrying out the household survey, since standard conventions of survey research are in some ways confounded by forms of social life in the lower Omo. In the latter half of the article we discuss the contrasting pictures that this research yielded.

### **Villagization and Plantation Development in the Lower Omo: The Planners’ View**

In 2012, the South Omo Zone Agriculture Bureau produced a “Villagization Plan” which described how, in the course of the coming year, the majority

of inhabitants of the zone—some forty-five thousand people—would be moved into new villages (FDRE 2012). According to official documents, moving these people, referred to collectively as pastoralists, into new villages and introducing them to new farming methods would improve their lives. In the Plan the benefits of villagization are described as follows: (1) growing new crops, such as sugarcane, on irrigated fields would improve food security; (2) providing people with schooling and medical services would improve their health; (3) settling in planned villages would reduce conflicts that result from “mobility in search of water and pasture” (FDRE 2012:5).

As laid out in the Plan, the campaign would begin with community meetings at which the benefits of villagization would be explained, whereupon people would be assigned plots on which to build their new houses. At the same time as the sugar-cane plantations, processing factories, and new towns and villages were being built on land that was owned by the local communities, people would be issued with formal titles to both residential land and to farmland: “In the case of land that relies on rain [for cultivation] 2 hectares would be apportioned to each settler pastoralist, whereas those settling on irrigable land would be apportioned 0.5 hectares each” (ibid., p.8). They would also be provided with food aid “for about eight months, until the crop they plant in the first year reach for harvest [sic] and they could feed themselves” (p.18).

The expansion of artificial irrigation in the lower Omo Valley was made possible by the construction of the Gibe III dam upstream, which began in 2008. In conjunction with the dam, a system of canals was built to distribute water to the Omo-Kuraz Sugar Plantation, within which selected plots of land were set aside for use by “settler pastoralists.” The Omo-Kuraz Plantation is part of the Kuraz Sugar Development Project, a state-owned enterprise projected to cover 175,000 hectares (Ethiopian Sugar Corporation 2015). At full capacity, it was predicted, Kuraz would be responsible for fully a quarter of the country’s sugar and ethanol production, more than any other plantation in the country (Ethiopian Sugar Corporation 2014). In line with this vision, the Villagization Plan describes the overarching goal of the villagization project as to “change the economic and social condition of the pastoralists and make them out-growers for the sugar factory” (FDRE 2012:4).

### **Investigating the Bodi Experience of Villagization**

It is important to note that although the people who were targeted by the South Omo villagization program are frequently described as “pastoralists” by government officials (e.g., Meles 2011; Walta 2012), their diets were traditionally based mainly on farming of sorghum and maize, with dairy products providing an important supplementary component.<sup>2</sup> In the more southerly parts of the lower Omo valley, there is ample floodplain on which to cultivate these crops; further north, people rely on a triad of livelihood

strategies: herding, flood-retreat farming, and rain-fed agriculture (Turton 1985). This misconception about the livelihoods of the target population—the idea that, being pastoralists, they are unacquainted with agriculture—is widespread, and has had significant repercussions for the ways development is imagined by planners.

Our study focused on the Me'en living on the eastern side of the Omo River, a segment of the larger Me'en ethno-linguistic group known to the Ethiopian authorities and outsiders as the Bodi, who on account of their location close to the Kuraz Sugar Development Project were the first people in the lower Omo to be targeted for villagization.<sup>3</sup> Numerically among the smaller ethno-linguistic groups of the region, the Bodi were estimated in the most recent census to number approximately 8,000 people (CSA 2008). According to the Villagization Plan, between 2012 and 2013, 1,430 households were to be resettled in three “new villages” in Bodi territory. (Assuming an average household size of five, this would represent more than seven thousand people.) Infrastructure for the villagization sites was first installed in 2012—schools, clinics, veterinary centers, and mill houses.

It was not until planning was well under way that the government arranged public meetings to announce the villagization plan, and little effort was made to accommodate local ideas regarding the layout of the sites or the kinds of livelihoods that might be possible there. As Yidneckachew, who studied the public consultation process, observed, “the process was a nominal participation of pastoralists [sic]. . . . Discussions at the public forums were top-down. . . . [The] facilitators determined and controlled the agenda, the alternative solutions, and the process of the consultation” (2015:296, 300). The forums were orchestrated so as to permit the airing of “personal concerns about the project,” but did not afford the opportunity for any major challenge to the premises of the scheme. Rather than being open to all comers, participants in the forum were “called” up by the organizers based on their “proximity to the project command area.” According to a member of the Regional Steering Committee interviewed by Yidneckachew, “participants were not to represent any [particular] group or the pastoralists’ concern” (2015:296).

Settlers began to arrive in May of 2012, and official data suggest that by September of that year a few dozen households were living in each of the villages. The principal “benefit” they received was an allocation of 30kg of grain per household per month as food aid. Land for irrigated farming was unavailable for approximately the first six months, but by early 2013, agricultural extension agents (known locally as development agents) had begun directing the settlers to grow maize using an irrigation system provided by the Sugar Corporation. The promise of the planners was that by using new seed, fertilizer, and artificial irrigation, two or three harvests would be possible each year, with additional income available from selling cane to the Sugar Corporation for processing in the new factories.<sup>4</sup> In practice, delays in the installation of infrastructure—both irrigation systems and the sugar factories—meant that these harvests were elusive. This was only one of the

ways in which the experience of villagization failed to meet official expectations. Although people were at first given plots of 0.5 ha to cultivate maize for subsistence on irrigated plots, later the size of their plots was reduced to 0.25 ha. Once the processing factory was completed, the planners suggested, people would be entitled to an extra 0.75 ha of land for sugar-cane cultivation, in addition to the 0.25 ha they were already cultivating.<sup>5</sup>

We carried out our research both in villagization sites near Hana town (the administrative center of Salamago *woreda*) and in a comparison community in the division of Bodi territory called Gura.<sup>6</sup> In the following section, we describe our research methods and some of the challenges faced in the process of carrying out the research.

### *Survey Methods*

To assess food access quantitatively, we used an adapted version of the Household Food Insecurity Access questionnaire (Swindale & Bilinsky 2006) which asks about household members' experience of hunger and worry over food in the month before the survey. The questionnaire, developed by the Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance (FANTA) project of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), consists of nine questions, including, "In the past 30 days, did you: worry that your household would not have enough food? / eat fewer meals because of a shortage of food? / go to sleep hungry?" If respondents answered "Yes" to any of these questions, follow-up questions were asked, concerning the frequency within the past month with which these occurred (rarely, sometimes, or often). The resulting data are conventionally treated either as a continuous measure of food insecurity or used to categorize households as "food secure" (no "Yes" responses) or as "mildly, moderately, or severely food insecure." "Moderate" food insecurity implies, for example, often having to consume foods you really don't want to eat, or ever having to skip meals. "Severe" food insecurity implies such things as skipping meals frequently, having no food in the house, or going all day and night without eating (Coates et al. 2007). The survey also included questions about household demographics, water access, and assets.<sup>7</sup>

Carrying out a household survey in the lower Omo involves various challenges that are often either absent or ignored in conventional accounts of survey research. First, Bodi is a largely pre-literate society, yet to carry out a survey, the services of enumerators who were both literate and fluent in the local language, Me'en, were required. In an attempt to identify suitable enumerators, one of us (EGJS) put out word of the project in Hana town, and then, with the help of our collaborators, administered a short literacy test, in the shape of an application form, to the men who came forward. (All of the candidates were men.) We subsequently provided the six men who demonstrated themselves most literate in Amharic with a week's training on the procedures of survey research in general and the project questionnaire in particular. The questionnaire was written and answers

were recorded in Amharic, with translation into Me'en being carried out spontaneously by the enumerators. In principle it would have been better to print the questions and record answers in Me'en, but since that language is rarely written, it would have made the interview process much more difficult for the enumerators, while also increasing the likelihood of errors.<sup>8</sup>

A second challenge was that survey research conventionally requires a sampling frame from which to select households for inclusion, yet civil registration systems barely function in the lower Omo, and official data on the population of the villagization sites proved unreliable. Government reports from early 2013 suggested that more than 800 households had registered to resettle, but when we visited the villages in August 2013, there were altogether only about a hundred houses that were occupied in the three new villages.<sup>9</sup> We therefore attempted to survey all households in the new villages in which there were children under five years old. (We focused on households with children under five in order to assess children's growth—another measure of nutritional sufficiency.) Of the approximately one hundred households present in the villagization sites, fifty-nine included children under five, and all of these consented to participate in our survey.

In Gura, the community that had not yet been subjected to villagization, we planned to survey an equivalent number of households to those we had covered in the existing resettlement sites. The social and physical organization of space among the Bodi is important for understanding the logic of sampling here. Bodi traditionally divide space into two types of settlements, each associated with a particular kind of food production: (1) cattle camps (*ori*, singular *tu*) in the grasslands and (2) cultivation sites (*kerta*, singular *ker*) in the bush or by the river, where they practice either slash-and-burn agriculture or riverbank cultivation on land inundated by the annual rise of the Omo (Fukui 2001). These settlements differ in their layout and demographic composition. In the agricultural sites, women build temporary houses in small clusters, in immediate proximity to their fields. The women live in these settlements, known as *olman*, during most of the cultivation season, guarding their fields against pests. Men are more often found in the cattle camps (*ori*), where forage and water for cattle are available. Each cattle camp consists of a cluster of family compounds arranged in a U-shape around one or more shade trees under which the men habitually gather to socialize. (Young children move freely across these gendered spaces; as they grow older, they conform more to gender expectations.) Although such camps are sometimes located close to each other, overall they are widely scattered over the grassland. In August 2013, the people of Gura were residing principally in cattle camps, and the research sample in Gura was drawn from three such camps, which were judged by locals to be representative of Gura generally. Of the approximately fifty households present in these cattle camps, thirty-nine included children under five, and all of these consented to participate in the survey.

During administration of the survey in both Gura and the new villages, our team was accompanied at all times by a member of the Salamago woreda

administration, who assisted in explaining the aims and procedures of our research to informants. We made an effort to explain to respondents the independence of our research from the activities of the government. However, the formal nature of the survey procedure, and the fact that a government employee was involved, may have identified us in the minds of respondents as complicit in the villagization program. This may have made some people reluctant to report that they were hungry, lest it be interpreted as criticism of the program.

### *Ethnographic Methods*

In addition to the household survey, this paper also draws on four months of ethnographic research carried out by LB during three stays between 2012 and 2015—the years before and immediately after the villagization campaign in Hana—and on fieldnotes made by EGJS during the administration of the survey in 2013 and during a one-week visit in 2016. The primary focus of the ethnographic work was the communities of Gura, but we also carried out comparative work in the villagization sites and in Hana town.

Our ethnographic research was based on spontaneous and opportunistic conversations (for LB primarily in Me'en, in which she is fluent, and for EGJS in Amharic and English) as well as on semi-structured interviews and observations. One difficulty of carrying out ethnographic research in the new villages was the obvious fear among people not closely acquainted with the ethnographers of voicing negative comments, in case they were reported to the authorities. Thanks to LB's long-term presence, however, we were able to discern people who had been recruited by the local government as "representatives of the Bodi" and who had thus learned not to criticize government policies. Another strategy we adopted to improve rapport was to rely on friends who introduced us to trusted relatives living in the new villages.

### **Comparing Ethnographic and Survey Data on Food Security**

During the period of our research, Hana town was undergoing a transformation from a mere police post into an increasingly bustling town, and camps for full-time plantation workers, who numbered in the thousands, were springing up alongside the plantation. Both through informal labor migration and through planned resettlement, Salamago woreda as a whole was becoming increasingly ethnically diverse. Resettlement from Konso, a highland area of southern Ethiopia, had begun in the mid-2000s; and from 2012 increasing numbers of spontaneous migrants were also arriving from other parts of Ethiopia's Southern region in search of work on the new plantations.<sup>10</sup> These newly-arrived migrants were especially visible in Hana town: in the mornings they lined the main street to await transportation by lorry to the plantation sites, and in the evenings they filled the restaurants

and bars—businesses that themselves had been established only within the previous year. In the space of a decade, not only the Bodi but also the neighboring Mursi and other indigenous people of Salamago woreda had become minorities in their own lands.

Our survey provides a snapshot of food access conditions in the villagization sites and in Gura in August 2013 (Table 1). The food insecurity scale ranges from 0 to 27, with higher numbers representing more experiences of food insecurity (hunger, skipped meals, reduced dietary diversity, and worry over food) within the past month.

Our initial hypothesis was that food security would be lower in villagization sites: that is to say that compared to Bodi communities not subject to villagization, households in the villagization sites would experience greater food insecurity. This prediction was based on a reading of the literature on the social impacts of resettlement, which demonstrates that relocation has more often deepened poverty than ameliorated it (Cernea 2000; Scudder 2012).<sup>11</sup>

The household survey data, however, do not support this hypothesis. Food insecurity was high in both of the study areas—85 percent of households in the villagization sites and 97 percent of households in the Gura cattle camps reported experiences in the preceding month that reflect moderate or severe food insecurity according to conventional criteria (Coates et al. 2007)—but responses to the survey suggest that people in Gura experienced a degree of food insecurity significantly higher than those in the villagization sites.

**Table 1.** Food Access in Villagization Sites Near the Kuraz Sugar Plantation and in the Cattle Camps of Gura, in August 2013

|  | Mean food<br>insecurity score* | Standard<br>deviation | Sample size<br>(households) |
|--|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Villagization sites (receiving food aid)   | 7.8                            | 5.1                   | 52                          |
| Gura cattle camps (not receiving food aid) | 11.6                           | 5.0                   | 39                          |

\* Mean values are significantly different between the two sites ( $p < .05$ )

In interpreting these results, it is important to remember that at the time of the research, the government was distributing food aid only to people in the new villages. Our ethnographic data also allow us to check the validity of the food security indicator against other aspects of context. How did the communities differ in terms of food access, beyond food aid? How did the people feel about their situation?

### **Bodi Views of Food Security and Well-Being under Villagization**

As this was the first attempt at smallholder irrigated cultivation within the Kuraz Sugar Development Project, there was significant pressure on development agents to make it into a showcase for the success of the whole project. Once irrigated plots were made available in early 2013, development

agents monitored the participants' fields closely and held the Bodi accountable for any failure to bring the maize to maturity. This monitoring and nagging was resented by the Bodi, because crucial aspects of the farming—the size and location of plots, the type of seed, and the time of planting—were beyond their control. Settlers perceived themselves as occupying a lowly position in a command hierarchy, which grated with Bodi ideals of autonomy. As one settler told us:

In the fields we cultivate ourselves with our sickle [the rain-fed fields], the fire eats everything and the weeds don't grow fast. And if they grow, it's only a little. People weed only for two or three days; if necessary we might weed for five days. We hold a working party with beer so we can finish it up quickly, and then we go back to our cattle and our children—we act like adults and live in peace, at home. But here, if the maize dries up, the Highlanders keep nagging you [as if you're a child]: "Why hasn't this person weeded his field? Why hasn't that person brought water into his field?" (Man from one of the new villages, June 2014)

The supply of water from the new irrigation system was also controlled by the Sugar Corporation. Some settlers found themselves in a position of advantage—those whose fields were closest to the canal received the water first when the canal gate was open, and could then block it so that the water entered their fields only. But crop yields from the irrigated fields were generally disappointing. Even when planting occurred during the rainy season *and* water was available from the canal—and the crops therefore received both rainwater and artificial irrigation—the resulting harvest was not enough to feed the settlers, let alone to produce a surplus for sale.

In addition to simple availability of food, a sense of well-being for the Bodi also includes the opportunity to consume—and share—food and drink in familiar ways. The physical arrangement of the new villages presented a key challenge here. The villagization sites, once they were established, bore little resemblance either to the clusters of houses found in cultivation sites (*olman*) or to the cattle camps (*ori*) that we described earlier. Although the new villages were supposed to gather several hundred households into more nucleated settlements, within these sites each household was positioned quite distant from the next—each on its own 0.5 hectare grid square—and in the allocation of plots to settlers, the local administration gave people little choice over either the location of their houses or whom they had as neighbors. These features of the new villages implied a very different set of routines and relationships than the ones the Bodi were accustomed to. When asked whether he shared his morning coffee with neighbors, a resident of a new village answered:

Where can we share our coffee? There is no one you can call and say: "Come on, let's drink coffee!" The way God made us is this: you are my neighbor, we get along well, so we build our compounds close to each other.<sup>12</sup> God made us this way. But now the government comes and wants

to turn us into Highlanders. Do our bodies know their ways? They don't. Now that we're here, we cultivate the maize as they show us, and the maize ripens and we eat it, but our bodies feel bad (*rēē ga k'ēsi*). (Man from one of the new villages, June 2014)

Bodily discomfort and social alienation emerged as key idioms for describing the disruptions and dislocations associated with villagization and plantation work. When one of us (LB) visited an irrigated field where women were weeding and asked them how they felt about the new conditions, at first some young women answered shyly that the government was arranging things well. But then an older woman spoke up: "Here, we are forced to live like *serategna* [Amharic: day-laborers]!" In their own fields, she went on to say, they had shade to rest in, and could make coffee; they enjoyed the comfort of their homes, and they mixed farm work with breaks drinking or socializing. But in the irrigated fields set aside for the settlers, which were approximately a half hour's walk away from new villages, all the shade trees had been cut down. In order to get a little shelter from the sun, they had to spread clothes over the immature maize plants and then crowd into what little shade it afforded, to drink the beer of the working-party. From being a place to live *and* work, the fields had now become mainly a place of (hard) work.

The heat, the sense of powerlessness, the meager harvests, and the harassment of the development agents made life hard for people in the villagization sites. Food aid provided by the government was the principal attraction. The following excerpt from an interview with a man from a cattle camp a few kilometers from Hana town provides insight into the motivations of many of the first people who registered as residents of the new villages.

When the Highlanders [i.e., government agents] told us to move [into the new village], I went to build my house. My wives, they were hungry. I had no cattle to sell. So I said: "Let's build a house and take some food [rations] from there." And we built one.

[LB:] *Did you just plant a few poles?*

I just planted a few poles [to mark the site] and I came back. Then I went to cultivate in the bush [to carry out rain-fed cultivation]. When my maize ripened, I left [the resettlement site]. (Man from a cattle camp near Hana town, 2012)

This strategy of building a makeshift house at the villagization site in order to obtain rations seems to have been tried by many other families. Rather than representing a vote of confidence in the development plan, the principal reason for participating in the villagization campaign was in many cases to obtain food aid. Many of those who opted to settle before the irrigated fields were made available were struggling to support themselves—some, like the man quoted above, had few cattle, and could not therefore

afford to sell any to buy grain; some had few able-bodied children, or elderly husbands. Others were relatively well-off, but wanted to take advantage of the food being distributed in the villagization sites.<sup>13</sup> Similar to the case of villagization in central Ethiopia studied by Helen Pankhurst (1992), this initiative appears to have attracted a variety of people for a variety of reasons—some of them among the poorest and most desperate, and others who were more prosperous but saw an opportunity to profit from the situation.

When we compare the experiences of the Bodi with other documented cases of resettlement, it becomes apparent that certain crucial aspects are due not so much to villagization as to the political and ecological changes that accompanied it: the fact that it was carried out at the same time as (1) a massive influx of labor migrants, which added to the almost decade-long presence of people deliberately resettled from Konso and (2) the ecological reengineering of the landscape to make it fit for plantation agriculture. In these respects the situation in the lower Omo closely resembles developments in the Awash Valley in the 1960s and '70s (Kloos 1982), and the combination of villagization and plantation development that has been carried out more recently in Ethiopia's western province of Gambella (Fana 2016a, 2016b). In all three of these cases, a variety of forces undermined the livelihoods and food security of indigenous people *at the same time* as some of them were attempting to make a living in the resettlement sites. In the next section, we place our ethnographic findings in relationship to the work of other scholars of forced displacement and well-being, and we briefly consider the kinds of resistance the Bodi mounted to the changes that were forced upon them. Finally, we reflect on the implications of different research methods and interpretive frameworks for shedding light on these problems.

### **Do Our Bodies Know Their Ways?**

We have highlighted in this study certain misconceptions on which villagization in the lower Omo has been based—(1) that the target population for resettlement were pastoralists unacquainted with agriculture, when in fact they were already reliant on farming for the majority of their diets; (2) that these individuals would enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to “settle” as soon as they were made aware of it, whereas in practice they viewed it skeptically; (3) that the resettlement sites would be more nucleated than places like Gura, whereas in important respects they were more spread out; and (4) that food security and well-being would inevitably be improved by these changes. We have shown that villagization was actually experienced by the Bodi settlers as undermining food security and diminishing well-being. It was experienced as heat, as disruption to routines, as a loss of control over livelihoods, as being treated like children rather than adults, and as abstracting work from ordinary sociality (see Carrier 2001). The question asked by one of our informants, “Do our bodies know their ways?” is emblematic of

the profound disruption that many Bodi felt in the context of the upheaval that was forced upon them.

Unpacking the words our informant used helps clarify some implications that are otherwise hazy. A literal translation of the phrase would be “Does the body/self know? It doesn’t.” *Ree*, which we have translated here as “body,” can also be understood as “self,” a double meaning that challenges the mind / body dichotomy in Western philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Students of the Mursi, culturally one of the Bodi’s closest neighbors, have analyzed the Mursi word for “body” and its relationship to local notions of selfhood. Eczet explains that the Mursi word *ree* denotes a general state of being, rather than the physical body as such—hence the phrases “the body is good” or “the body is bad” refer to personal well-being or ill-being.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the “body” or “self” is intensified or strengthened through positive social interactions, when it is perceived by others (Eczet 2013:86; see also Lienhardt 1985:155). Mursi and Bodi acknowledge that persons are made up of social relations; social interactions are therefore actively sought out (Fayers-Kerr 2013).

The opportunity to drink coffee with one’s friends in the morning—something that people missed in the new villages—may seem a banal thing, occurring as it does against the backdrop of land alienation and the upending of a political and ecological order that for the Bodi has deep cosmological significance (Buffavand 2016). But this practice is indicative of a set of meaningful routines that allow people to experience what is good in life, including connection with others. There’s a naturalness about these routines (“God made us this way”); when people are forced to abandon them, they suffer (“our bodies feel bad”) (see Weisner 2009). In urban settings in Ethiopia, price spikes following the global financial crisis of 2008 impacted on well-being in part because they made it hard for the poor to afford coffee, and precluded the social gatherings associated with coffee drinking (Hadley et al. 2012).<sup>16</sup> Freeman describes social gatherings for coffee drinking among the Gamo of the Ethiopian south-west highlands as a “technique of happiness” which allows people to “subsume [themselves] in the social fabric” (2015:162, 171). The villagization scheme’s effective prohibition of such “techniques of happiness” can be seen as part of a continuum of violence inflicted on the Bodi and others in the name of development.<sup>17</sup> Focusing only on the most obvious manifestations of this violence, such as the bulldozing of one’s backyard, can serve as a barrier to empathy for those of us who have little in our life experience to compare with this. Focusing on the denial of small freedoms, on the other hand, can help make larger injustices more comprehensible.

“To be resettled,” Oliver-Smith has written, “is one of the most acute expressions of powerlessness because it constitutes a loss of control over one’s physical space. The only thing left is . . . the body” (2010:14). The hunger and insecurity that our informants spoke of underline the fact that the body in question is vulnerable. If the set of routines and practices we rely on to make a living and to give life meaning—in short, our culture—is

thought of as a second skin, then this is a body that has been stripped of that skin.

### Local Resistance, and Its Limits

The sense of indignity and loss of control that we witnessed in the lower Omo are compatible with what researchers of forced displacement have documented in many other places (Oliver-Smith 2010). Another commonality is the ubiquity of resistance. One of the resources on which the Bodi have drawn in order to preserve a sense of dignity is their long experience of resistance to the projects of powerful outsiders (something they share with many other peoples of the Ethiopian periphery; see James 1979; González-Ruibal 2014). In the case of the resettlement campaign, this resistance took the form both of overt conflict and covert subversion. Open conflict occurred principally between the Bodi and immigrants from Konso, and mostly took the form of tit-for-tat killings. These conflicts began almost immediately upon the arrival of Konso settlers in the government resettlement drive in 2004. The government intervened in these cases by attempting to broker peace meetings. But with the region becoming newly critical to national development plans, the government installed a larger federal military presence in the woreda from 2012 onward. A denouement occurred in early 2014, when, after a new round of fighting had broken out between the Bodi and settlers from Konso, the Ethiopian military intervened on the side of Konso settlers, firing on Bodi who approached Konso settlements; according to Ethiopian Satellite Television the soldiers injured seventeen women, children, and youth (ESAT 2014). In the midst of this conflict, school teachers and other government workers left the new villages, as did most of the settlers who had been living there.

Resistance to the government's designs was more commonly of a covert kind: (1) refusing to show up to meetings, or to endorse the plans presented at them; (2) partial compliance, in the form of building new houses, laying claim to irrigated land, and receiving (and sometimes re-selling) food aid, and (3) adopting a bet-spreading strategy by trying out life in the new villages, while keeping one foot planted in their former homes. It also manifested in the porous nature of the resettlement sites, and the ways in which people moved back and forth between the new villages and cattle camps and rain-fed cultivation areas—treating the villagization sites not as their only homes, but as another node in their network.

These resistance tactics work, however, only as long as other livelihood options remain open. As Scott has noted in his work on the “hill people” of Southeast Asia, grabbing of land and other resources by outsiders has diminished the power of techniques of resistance that for centuries helped people on the periphery maintain a degree of autonomy. Resettlement—the “transplantation” of “presumptively loyal and land-hungry valley populations” to the hills—has been a key strategy in the outsiders’ playbook (Scott 2009:xii). Another and complementary strategy has been to redesign

the landscape, using engineering technologies that effectively turn the “hills” into “valleys”—or, in the Ethiopian case, technologies that make the lowlands useful for highlanders. We see all three of these strategies employed by the Ethiopian state and its corporate partners in the lower Omo, to the detriment of the indigenous people of the region.

In some ways our research may have captured a moment when things were at their best for the Bodi in terms of engagement with the government's designs: they were able to access food aid, but also to live without it. By 2016 these opportunities had narrowed. Filling of the reservoir behind the Gibe III dam, and the suspension of flows from the upper basin, led to the end of the seasonal flood in the lower Omo. The dam, and the diversion of water along newly-built canals, enabled the establishment of the Kuraz Sugar Development Project and private cotton estates, but effectively ruled out river-bank cultivation—a livelihood strategy that was crucial for an estimated ninety thousand people living along the banks of the Omo (Turton 2010). The option of opening up new fields by the riverside on which to grow sorghum, or clearing bush on which to grow maize, has been largely foreclosed to the Bodi and their neighbors, through processes that the planners did not undertake to explain.

In 2016, Bodi families who for several years had been growing maize on plots set aside for settlers continued to farm there, but they recognized that this alone would not meet their needs, and many had fallen back on cultivation in rain-fed areas, which due to the end of river-bank cultivation had become newly crucial to their survival. Should the rains fail—not an unlikely scenario in this semi-arid region—famine would ensue, just as it did in the Awash in the 1970s (Kloos 1982). Moreover, since the Omo flood is vital not only for the livelihood systems of most of the people of southwest Ethiopia, but also for Lake Turkana and its fisheries, the dam and plantation schemes plausibly threaten the food security of *all* indigenous peoples of the lower Turkana basin, on both sides of the Ethiopia-Kenya border (Anonymous 2013; Avery 2013).<sup>18</sup>

### **Bearing Witness to Development Forced Displacement**

In drawing attention to the potential of household survey research to hide, rather than expose, the essential features of this predicament, we are sounding a conclusion rather different from the conventional “More research is needed. . . .” The potential of research to represent faithfully the experience of those who are paying the costs of development cannot be taken for granted. In focusing only on the villagization piece of what is in fact a much wider set of interventions, our food access survey risks presenting a misleading picture. As we have shown, the survey results are best interpreted as showing that in both the villagization sites and the community of Gura, a majority of people were struggling to obtain enough food at the time of our research. Having carried out this survey, and having invested considerable effort in conforming as closely as possible to the conventions

of quantitative social science research, we can make this claim with particular force. The weakness of the survey—and of cross-cultural surveys in general—is that, in pursuit of data that are widely comparable, it excludes important aspects of local context. As the designers of USAID’s household food insecurity questionnaires noted, “To develop a tool that is culturally invariant, some cultural specificity must be lost” (Deitchler et al. 2010:v). Or, as a cultural anthropologist might put it: the further your instruments travel, the less useful they are (Shweder et al. 2007).

In the time that has elapsed since we carried out the research for this paper, multiple delegations from donor country agencies such as USAID and DFID have paid “fact-finding” visits to the lower Omo, only for their findings to be misreported or buried (Hurd 2013; Turton 2014). The testimony of the Bodi that we have placed at the center of this article is a very small contribution towards redressing the debt owed by foreigners to some of the people who confided in them. It may be that the delegates from these agencies failed to report what they heard because it did not make sense to them: it did not square either with the official narrative of infrastructure development and improved service provision (the Ethiopian government’s narrative) or with the views of those critics who have focused on specific abuses, such as assaults and rapes committed by soldiers (e.g., Human Rights Watch 2012). The systematic forced displacement that the Bodi and Mursi have experienced has in fact occurred *alongside* the infrastructural development of which the government and the Sugar Corporation boast, and it raises more difficult political questions than does any isolated case of abuse. Household surveys, the standard means of generating evidence about human problems in the social sciences, are not well suited for investigating processes such as these. Unless surveys are accompanied by in-depth exploratory research, they risk overlooking the problem and merely reaffirming the preconceptions of the surveyors.

Whether villagization is improving food security and well-being, it turns out, is not a very good question. It assumes certain things that, in the course of our research, we have come to recognize as problematic. Foremost among them is the assumption that villagization is a potentially positive alternative to a livelihood system that remains viable, although possibly less conducive to food security and well-being. In fact, the hydro-engineering schemes that make irrigated agriculture possible for settlers simultaneously undermine the possibility of making a living in the “traditional” way. From being expert stewards of their landscape, the Bodi and other peoples of the Omo-Turkana basin are being forced into the position of ignorant and vulnerable laborers, out of touch with the world around them (see Hobart 1993). A survey that compares villagization sites with other communities that have not been villagized, but does not take into account the broader context of resource alienation and massive manmade ecological change, will miss this crucial fact.

By using ethnographic methods—by listening to the people on the front lines of this unfolding crisis, who oriented us towards the relationships

between the villagization scheme and broader changes underway in the region—we managed to avoid giving too much credence to the results of the household survey. Spending extended periods of time in the lower Omo, and getting a feel for the dynamics of a culture that has quite successfully weathered past ecological and political changes through a combination of herding, flood-retreat farming, and rain-fed agriculture, also helped us to see the limitations of the food insecurity questionnaire we employed. Food *access* at a given point in time (which, in spite of the scale's name, is what the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale really measures) should not be taken as synonymous with the broader construct of food *security*, which implies risks to food access over the longer term. In actuality, there are few situations in which people are less food secure than when they are dependent on rations from a government or an aid agency, or than when the social and ecological systems on which they have relied for generations are being redesigned around them.

On the basis of the principle, “You broke it, you fix it,” the moral responsibility for repairing the damage done to the livelihoods of the people of the lower Omo now rests with the Ethiopian government, its backers and collaborators—including Salini (the firm that designed the Gibe III dam), the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation, and the lease-holders who are growing cotton for export on land appropriated, without compensation, from local communities. This will require something more than staking out irrigated plots of 0.25 or 0.5 hectares per household, along with a promise that one day they may become outgrowers for the plantation. If analyses of the relative economic productivity of pastoralism and sugar production in the Awash serve as a guide (Behnke & Kerven 2013), a more equitable arrangement would be for the Sugar Corporation to hand over all profits from the plantation to the people from whom it has taken the land and water.

As we write, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn is inaugurating the Gibe III dam (Salini 2016). Downstream, the Bodi and their neighbors are hungrier and more desperate than they were before this EUR1.5 billion project began. In the years it would take for further research to be carried out and published, another dam might be built on the Omo, and thousands more people dispossessed and impoverished. Gibe IV is already under construction. For this reason, we urge our colleagues not only to consider the in-built distortions of some kinds of data collection, but also to make existing knowledge more widely available, and to assist in communicating what they know beyond academic circles.<sup>19</sup> One need only look to the extensive literature on “development-forced displacement” to see the parallels with the experience of the Afar and Oromo in the Awash, as well as with dozens of other cases where planned development has forced people into states of dependency. Such initiatives make possible increased security and well-being for some only at the cost of increased insecurity and suffering for others (Roy 1999). It is hard to escape the conclusion that in cases like these, famine is not the result of technical failures, but is rather the logical end result of projects based on socially unjust premises.

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## Notes

1. The current regime is the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, which has been in power since 1991. For a fuller listing of companies and state entities involved in dam and plantation development in the Lower Omo, see Kamski (2016).
2. Turton noted already in the 1970s for the neighboring Mursi people that cultivation 'clearly provides half of their daily subsistence' (1979:123). Although Mursi and Bodi in the early twenty-first century have more cattle on average than they had four decades ago, grain still constitutes the main part of their diet.
3. Interviews and ethnographic research for this study were carried out between 2012 and 2016; the household survey was conducted in August-September 2013.
4. The seed used was a variety of hybrid maize (BH-140) developed by agricultural researchers in central Ethiopia (FDRE 2012; see Benti Tolessa et al. 1996, Abdisa et al. 2001).
5. As of this writing, the sugar factory is still not operational (Kamski 2016).
6. Woreda is an intermediate level in the official system of regional governance (*kebele*, woreda, zone, regional state, nation-state)
7. Ethical review for the study was carried out by the Health Bureau of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region and by the Institutional Review Board of Emory University.
8. Missionaries working among highland Me'en have worked together with locals to translate sections of the New Testament and some school texts into Me'en, but the language is far from being established as a language of literacy, and among lowland Bodi (where our research was carried out) schools teach literacy in Amharic only.
9. Tewolde and Fana, who carried out research in the same year as we did, concurred that adoption of villagization site plots was significantly below government targets. In 2013, they wrote, the largest of the villages had "less than one-third of the planned household units living in it" (Tewolde & Fana 2014:126).
10. In 2004, according to official figures, some three thousand households were relocated to Salamago woreda from Konso (Ayke 2005).
11. Cernea (2000:20) describes some of the ways in which forced displacement can undermine food security: through receipt of inferior quality land, loss of access to common property resources (such as grazing, wild foods, and water sources), or outright landlessness.
12. The Me'en word translated as 'God' is *Tumo*. This does not correspond precisely to the English 'God'; 'Divinity' may be more appropriate (cf. Lienhardt 1961). 'God' is used here for the sake of intelligibility.

13. During the fieldwork for our household survey, for example, one of the enumerators whose relatives had taken up a plot in the settlement used our project automobile to transport bags of grain from the villagization site to town for resale—a practice that was officially prohibited, but to which the authorities turned a blind eye.
14. The work of Leenhardt is now a classic example of the relativity of the concept of 'body'. The missionary-cum-anthropologist was told by one of his Canaque students that the missionaries did not teach them the notion of the spirit, which they already knew, but that of the body (Leenhardt 1979:164 in Graeber 2011:243).
15. This is also the case in the Dinka language, which 'compels its speakers to integrate the moral and physical attributes of persons together within the physical matrix of the human body' (Lienhardt, 1985:150).
16. On the importance of coffee drinking in Ethiopia more generally, and its social implications, see Pankhurst (1997), Sagawa (2006), Seeman (2015), and LaTosky (forthcoming).
17. The idea of a continuum of violence is elaborated by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004).
18. Ecologists have predicted the end of the Omo flood brought about by the Gibe III dam will lead to a reduction of more than two-thirds in the yield of fisheries in the lake (Gownaris et al. 2017).
19. At least three forums exist for this kind of exchange: Mursi Online ([www.mursi.org](http://www.mursi.org)), the Lands of the Future initiative (Abbink et al. 2014; [www.eth.mpg.de/lof](http://www.eth.mpg.de/lof)), and the Omo-Turkana Research Network ([www.oturn.msu.edu](http://www.oturn.msu.edu)).

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