

Dassanetch Integrated Development Program (DIDP)
SNV-Ethiopia

Policy Recommendations for Peace Making:
The Lesson of the Inter-Ethnic Peace Ceremony in Arbore,
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Acknowledgements

Having being directly involved in the Peace Making Ceremony in Arbore, whose description is given in the alleged report written in Amharic by Ayalew Gebre, I summarise here observations relevant to policy in relation to peace making in the pastoral areas in Ethiopia and in East Africa.

My role was to coordinate the logistic assistance given by different NGOs and private enterprises which are active in Southern Omo and Borana, and to lease with the governmental institutions and Addis Ababa University. I wish to express my deep gratitude to SNV/NOVIB, CARE-Borana and Ethiopian Rift Valley Safaris for their substantial contributions that made possible the logistic organization of such an impressive gathering of people. Other organizations and individuals have given important support, among which Addis Ababa University, Catholic Church (Dimeka), Mekane Yesus (Konso), Weitu Project, Ivo Strecker, Ayalew Gebre, Alula Pankhurst and Yukio Miyawaki. The real protagonists of the ceremony were the pastoralists themselves and the regional and local administrators of South Omo Administrative Region and Borana Zone. Among the pastoral people a special mention goes to the Arbore, who have organized and hosted the ceremony, and to Horra Sora, the main reference for NGOs within the Arbore community. The administrators of South Omo, Borana and Konso not only have allowed the performance of the ceremony, but they have also been actively involved both in the selection of elders and in public debates. Their help, which shows a very good connection with the pastoral communities, has been essential for the success of the ceremony.

A message to the governmental organisations

The peace making ceremony of Arbore introduced some important innovations on the established way to afford State-sponsored peace making meetings in Southern Omo. Particularly, I would recall the following three elements:

- a) the ceremonial ground: it was performed in a very small town which is not an administrative centre, lacking the accommodation facilities normally available in Ethiopian towns;
- b) the extensive use of customary symbolism and ritual;
- c) open public debates by the pastoralists themselves according to customary procedures.

Rural pastoralists are the main protagonists of inter-ethnic warfare and rural

pastoralists are those who mainly suffer from it. Therefore, rural pastoralists, rather than town people, should also be the protagonists of peace making initiatives.

In this perspective, the choice of the place for peace negotiations, meetings and ceremonies is a crucial one. Places have themselves symbolic meaning. Generally speaking, administrative centres are associated with urban people, whereas villages are associated with the pastoralists. The choice of a rural area makes the pastoralists feel more directly involved in peace making and, consequently, feel responsible for maintaining peace. In addition, certain places may have a specific meaning, as in the case of Gandareba – the site selected by the Arbore ritual leaders for the Arbore ceremony – which was burnt three times in the history due to warfare (Report handwritten in Amharic by Hora Sora).

Beyond symbolic associations, the countryside locations do allow a much greater direct participation by the pastoralists themselves. This, in turn, makes it possible both the performance of the initiative according to the point b) and c) mentioned above and may allow the participation of other people who otherwise would be unable to attend. To give an example, the Nyangatom and the Dassanetch - who have been involved in reciprocal warfare over the last 10 years - have been discussing about the place for a forthcoming peace ceremony. They have both agreed that Kibish is an appropriate location, because it would allow the participation of the Toposa from Sudan, who are considered the real promoters of Nyangatom raids against the Dassanetch.

During the peace making ceremony in Arbore there was an extensive use of ritual. The ethnic groups of Southern Omo have their own system of belief, their own mode of prey and their own way to communicate based on ritual. If they have to be the protagonists of peace making, then their own ways to express feelings, wills and beliefs should be used. In this perspective the ritual performances of the Peace Ceremony held in Arbore – such as breaking the spears, exchanging of hoes, sticks and grass, blessing and cursing – are powerful means of peace making. Indeed the blessing on the morning of the 9th of March was one of the most impressive events of the ceremony: people of all ethnic groups were praying together in response to the blessing expressed in all the different local fashions, thus stressing the unity of all people of Southern Omo beyond the existing cultural differences.

The last point is public debate. Again, the pastoralists have their own ways to conduct public debate. It is important to stress that, although some principle of representation do exist, the pastoralists usually do not have real chiefs who may impose their decision to the community. Decisions binding for the community are reached by public debate according to certain rules. In general, anybody should be given the rights of talking and opposing decisions, which are lastly reached by general consensus. Therefore the selection of committees to discuss specific topics is not a proper procedure. Instead, as many people as possible should be given the possibility to take part in discussions. Another basic difference between procedures in official government meetings and the practises among the pastoralists is that in the latter the debate does not conform to a strict agenda, but people simply brings the discourse on the topics which are considered more relevant. Also, tables and chairs are not used in meetings. Tables are important because they symbolically stress roles of authority (those sitting at the table) which conflict with

the egalitarian character of pastoral societies.

The performance of peace making meetings in the Arbore fashion presents some organisational problems. Firstly, it is difficult to accommodate people who are used to the comforts and to the food of towns. However, if the protagonists have to be the pastoralists themselves, this is a price which has to be paid. The participation of town people should be limited to the key personages and administrators, and these people should be provided with adequate camping facilities. Secondly, the logistic organization of the meeting is very difficult. A lot of people have to be transported to the chosen place and they have to stay there for several days, because the traditional pastoral procedures do require more time for public debates (consensus has to be reached) and for rituals. Therefore adequate transportation and food supplies must be provided. As the administration may not dispose of adequate means, then NGOs have to assist in this field (see the following paragraph).

In synthesis, according to my personal opinion, peace making activities should be left to the initiative of the pastoralists, but the regional and local administrations have a crucial role in:

- 1) encouraging and assisting grass-roots initiatives, also by involving NGOs and enterprises for providing logistic help;
- 2) mediating among ethnic groups when direct communication is difficult;
- 3) exercising authority when this is requested by the local communities.

A message to civil society

When I approached the representatives of different NGOs asking for support to the peace making ceremony in Arbore, I first had either a cool reply or, in one case, a complete refusal. The refusal came from a very big NGO active in Hamar and Arbore, one that would have been the ideal sponsor for the ceremony. They have justified it by arguing that the peace making ceremony was a political rather than an economic activity and therefore it is out of the competence of NGOs. This view, however, is in my opinion completely wrong. Even beyond ethic and moral considerations on reciprocal killing, it may be enough to visit the abandoned town of Omoratte on the western bank of the Omo river to see the desolating rests of modern buildings belonging to the Ministry of Education, to the Ministry of Health and to the Ministry of Agriculture. If we take into consideration the perspective of the pastoralists, then we must acknowledge that until the survival of human beings and the protection of property will require the possession of arms and ammunitions, each family will be necessarily forced to buy arms and ammunition rather than to invest in schooling, veterinary and human drugs, fertilizer, etc. This is not due to the backward attitude of the people, but to the general context in the region forcing them to do it. We may even find the absurd situation of NGOs distributing food to people

that are at same time buying ammunition. Lastly, we should not underestimate the risk of conflict escalation. When warfare is so broadly widespread, under certain circumstances conflict may easily escalate into more organized war activities, as the examples of the nearby Sudan and Somalia sadly show .

In other words, inter-ethnic warfare can definitely be considered the main constraint to development in the region. As a consequence if NGOs and other agencies are really working for development they should become active in the field of peace making.

NGOs and other agencies may work for peace making in different ways. One of them is to assist the regional and local administrators in peace making ceremonies like the one held in Arbore. It is enough to put at disposal transportation means which are already in the area and to provide relatively small amounts of grain and other commodities which may mainly be bought locally. It is nothing compared with the large amounts of grain imported by Europe that are more or less regularly distributed in the region, let alone the food that has to be distributed if a group will be destitute due to inter-ethnic conflict (as in the case of the nearby Gabbra and partly of the Borana).

NGOs and other agencies should keep the problem of inter-ethnic conflict into consideration since the initial design of their projects in order to promote proposals which by themselves may help to maintain peaceful inter-ethnic relations, for example agricultural schemes jointly used by different ethnic groups (ideally located in areas of conflict) or inter-ethnic schools (as in the case of the school in Dadim, between Borana and Guji).

Identified initiatives to promote peace in South Omo

I conclude these comments by inviting NGOs and other agencies to support the following initiatives which have been requested by the people who have been attending the peace making ceremony in Arbore:

- 1) *Boarding school for students of different ethnic groups in Arbore*: Requested by the Arbore and supported by several other groups. In Arbore a school already exists. The idea is to build an hostel for the boys of the surrounding pastoral peoples. As the ceremony has demonstrated, Arbore is an ideal geographical and cultural centre for several surrounding groups.
- 2) *Agricultural development of the Weito valley*: Requested by the Arbore, the Tsemai and the Wata Wandu (a subsection of the Borana): Before engaging in practical activities, an over-whole study of the potentials of the entire valley should be undertaken, with special emphasis on technology manageable by the local communities and consuetudinary rights of the people of the area. Researchers of Addis Ababa University (Dept. of Sociology) may take the initiative, with external funding. The input of a 4 wheel drive car for research activities (during a limited span of time) is

necessary.

- 3) *Agricultural development of the Segan valley*: Requested by the Konso. Unfortunately the water of the Segan River seems to be too salty for irrigation. Studies may be undertaken by the Ministry of Agriculture.
- 4) *Maintenance of the road Teltelle-Arbore*: the idea was raised by the administrators of Teltelle and has been supported by the Arbore. The road, which went out of use since the beginning of the hostilities, may promote inter-ethnic trade with positive impact. If funds will be made available, the administration of Teltelle may take the responsibility to organize the work.
- 5) *Radio facilities (with solar panels) in isolated police posts both in Borana and Southern Omo*: the suggestion was made by several local administrators. The police located in some isolated places, through which war parties are likely to pass, do not dispose of radio facilities. Even if the police with the limited force available in the place would be unable to stop the raiders, they may both ask for support and alert the possible target communities, thus reducing the possibilities of success of the attack. It would be a relatively very small expense.