

## THE ECONOMICS OF VILLAGISATION IN ETHIOPIA

This article tries to examine the fundamental problems in the management of the Ethiopian agricultural sector in general and "villagisation" in particular. It is our contention that the theory and practice of "villagisation" cannot be properly understood without an overall review of the political/ideological context of the current state in Ethiopia.

### THE POLITICAL/IDEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The 1974 Ethiopian Revolution brought about radical and sweeping changes in production relations in the commanding heights of the economy in general and the rural economy in particular. Given the system of ownership which denied the majority of the peasants from realizing the fruits of their economic activity, the land question had to be resolved as a principal democratic question. The assumption then was that peasant ownership of the means of livelihood, i.e. land, would not only induce greater productivity in the rural economy, but would also contribute to complementarities (rural-urban, industry-agriculture, etc). Historical experience has also shown that such transformation in the rural economy would only take place when and if the rural population is encouraged to participate democratically in the political process of change.

The realities in Ethiopia have, however, been radically different from the above, particularly since 1977/78. The principal assumption of the Military Government of Ethiopia has been and continues to be that Ethiopia is undergoing a socialist revolution from above and that its social, economic and political transformation cannot and should not be divorced from the ideological cult of the centre. This preoccupation with the ideological and political centre, which essentially parallels social-militarism (i.e. military dictatorship in the name of socialism) characterizes the ideological, political, cultural and socio-economic plans and activities of the current military regime in Ethiopia. Questions with respect to nationalities,

workers, peasants, women, youth, religious groups and relations with other states are dictated from the centre with parasitic and opportunist intellectuals trying to provide the intellectual rationale for a given state policy and action. The planning and management of the national economy would, therefore, have to be understood in this light. The Military regime's vision of releasing the productive capacity of the rural and urban producers is one of central control and not of democratic participation.

#### VILLAGISATION : THEORY AND PRACTICE

The last few years have demonstrated to the entire world the bankruptcy of the Military government's economic policy. The catastrophic drought which claimed the lives of thousands of men, women and children and which was averted from claiming more lives through massive efforts of democratic and humanitarian groups, individuals and governments throughout the world, provided more vivid evidence of the state of affairs in Ethiopia. Preoccupied with its political survival, the Military regime and its cohorts forgot one of the driving forces which brought about the downfall of the regime it replaced, namely the "hidden famine" under Emperor Haile Sellasie. Although circumstances naturally differ, history repeats itself, in Ethiopia the history of misery and starvation continues to repeat itself not because the country is poor in natural and humane resources but because of the lack of democratic leadership.

Experts from both socialist countries and western international and private institutions have written a great deal about the enormous potential, particularly in agriculture of Ethiopia. A study more than two decades ago, by the Food and Agricultural Organisation, complemented by a study of the Stanford Food Research Institute showed that Ethiopia possesses fertile and arable land which would not only make it self-sufficient but which would, if productively utilized, feed the entire Middle East.

The enormous and productive feature of Ethiopia (of course in potential terms) was recently observed by none other than one of the country's closest allies, North Korea. A team of experts from this country have been studying the productive potential of one administrative region, Gojjam. Their conclusion was that they had never seen such productive soil. In their preliminary trials the yield of rice achieved per hectare was very high without fertilizers. The same conclusions have been reached by other groups with regard to the fertility of the soil in most of the administrative regions of the south. Then, why starvation ? Why is the Ethiopian peasantry condemned to perpetual misery and left to the vagaries of natural disaster ? What has been the Military dictatorship's response to this economic backwardness ?

The effects of the drought cannot be explained by natural phenomena alone. For surely, in a country where scientific irrigation, soil conservation, reforestation, physical and social infrastructure, etc., are the exception rather than the rule and in a country where war and rebellion have become part and parcel of everyday life, natural disaster would inevitably have a fertile ground. It would then follow that a prerequisite for rural and agricultural transformation would be political resolution of internal conflict, principally the question of nationalities. Further, agricultural and rural development would require massive transfers of resources and know-how, including fertilizers, extension services, social and physical infrastructures, improved agricultural inputs and recognition and implementation of rational pricing policies. It goes without saying that farmers would have to have confidence in the political regime, i.e. they would have to be motivated... Such motivation cannot be realized without democratic participation of the producers.

Properly understood then, "villagisation" would take place as part of a democratic process in which scattered farmers, villagers and other individuals are brought together into communi-



ties. The idea of bringing such scattered populations into critical masses would be to induce productivity through efficient use of physical and social infrastructure. In other words, the economic advantages of "villagisation" are greater than those under scattered and disbursed socio-economic life. The Military regime's understanding of this theory and its social practice have been different. The regime views "villagisation" from a security and control vantage point. The regime responded to the massive drought by a massive transfer of hundreds of thousands of people to so-called fertile areas. In doing this, it underlined its adherence to military principles in resolving economic and political problems. It confirmed the regime's denial of the elementary rights of the rural population thereby further arresting the motivation to produce. Instead of tackling the problem of rural poverty in the north rationally, the regime opted to depopulate. Instead of creating complementarities between the northern and southern populations, the regime further contributed to the division and suspicion among the various nationalities. Further, instead of undertaking systematic and scientific studies with respect of transmigration (including preparation of the requisite social and physical infrastructure) the regime made resettlement a massive military exercise for control. Thus, both the theoretical premise and the practice are counter to the principles of national, democratic, economic and social reconstruction in Ethiopia.

The "villagisation" process which has been started in the eastern part of the country, principally in the Harrarghe administrative region is no different from the massive, militaristic and anti-democratic resettlement program of the regime. Within the Ethiopian context, where national economy has been and is still deteriorating and disintegrating, forced "villagisation" is not a rational and democratic organisation of the rural economy, but a means by which the present state exercises full control. The trend, which started in 1977/78, is not towards democratisation, including maximum use of the creative potential of rural peasant-

try, but increased control and security, policing of the producers and repression. As has been evidenced in the urban areas (through the Urban Dwellers Association) "villagisation" is intended to serve the political and ideological control of the state rather than to induce rural productivity.

NEWS BRIEFS ... NEWS BRIEFS ... NEWS BRIEFS ... NEW BRIEFS. ■■■■■

DEFECTIONS CONTINUE ...

The latest in a long series of defections that have been going on for some time came from Czechoslovakia on March 26 when the first secretary of Ethiopia's Embassy in that country, Mr. MESFIN MEKONNEN, announced in Bonn that he will not return to his country because of his opposition to the government and the regime's attempts 'to force him to join the WPE'.

In February, WPE central committee member and Ethiopia's Ambassador to Japan, Mr. ABEBA KEBEDE announced his resignation as a gesture of opposition. He pointed out that the policy pursued by the government had plunged Ethiopia into an economic and social crisis and added that it was not his wish to serve a government that had bowed to Soviet pressure. Mr. ABEBE had previously been Minister of Domestic Trade.

Late last year another Ambassador, this time to Sweden, General TAYE TILAHU, announced that he had left his post because "the Mengistu regime had betrayed the revolution and was consolidating its own power with Soviet help at the expense of the Ethiopian people". The Ambassador, an Air Force general who previously served as Minister of the Interior and Defense, said that his decision to break with the government was due to "an ideological and moral gulf" and because the policies of Mengistu were "precipitating war and famine instead of peace; disharmony and disunity