



Design and Assessment of
water-energy-food-environment
Mega-Systems

Resettlement of Gumuz communities around Ethiopia's Blue Nile dam

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Abstract

This working paper presents preliminary conclusions from research carried out in Benishangul Gumuz and Amhara National Regional States of Ethiopia in November 2018 and January 2019. It explores the programme of resettlement of Gumuz farmers and others living at low altitude along the Nile and Beles rivers, whose home areas are expected to be flooded on completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and filling of a new reservoir. We focus on problems associated with access to social services and to common resources, notably water; on land, housing, property and compensation; on livelihoods impacts and prospects; on changes in social and community articulation; and on issues of planning, budgeting and coordination of responsibility among stakeholders. These findings, which indicate strong continuities with the well documented problems of global dam-induced displacement, and resettlement in Ethiopia's past, suggest the potential for improving policy and institutional decision making by enhancing learning from existing experiences, rooted in a nuanced understanding of local conditions. The findings are designed both to inform the period to 2022, the currently projected conclusion of the GERD construction phase, and to encourage longer-term commitment and planning, once the dam is built, that would maximise shared benefits, in terms of social and economic development, locally, among the resettled Gumuz, and nationally and regionally.

Keywords

Resettlement, benefit sharing, social development, economic development

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We were impressed by the thought and commitment that has gone into resettlement ahead of the filling of the GERD reservoir in what is perhaps the most inaccessible part of Ethiopia. That there remain shortcomings, a number of them critical, does not detract from the important work which has been undertaken; but improvements could and should still be made. It is in this spirit of constructive engagement that our findings and suggestions for further analysis and strategies for potential problem solving and resource sharing are made in this working paper. We welcome feedback in the same spirit to vaughanresearch@gmail.com.

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1 Introduction, research approach and outline

1.1 Resettlement in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has had an unhappy 50-year history of resettlement by the state: ostensibly for developmental purposes or 'their own good' Ethiopian citizens have been encouraged – or forced – to move, in four major waves. Under the Dergue government in the 1980s, the country was a 'high modernist' archetype of massive, top-down social engineering (Scott, 1998) under resettlement and 'villagisation', which drew widespread criticism. It was a surprise to many when, from 2003, a second phase of ambitious large-scale relocation under the EPRDF government moved new populations in Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and the Southern Region into areas of these federated states seen as more fertile or less densely populated. Although apparently avoiding some of the disasters of the enforcement of the 1980s (Pankhurst, 2009, pp 173–176), this initiative too had its critics (Hammond, 2008; Pankhurst & Pigué, 2009a), and caused very significant social dislocation and lasting conflict. These two rounds of resettlement alone moved more than 1.2 million Ethiopians (Cernea, 2009, p xxvi).

From 2008, a third programme of state-engineered social relocation was launched in the lowland states of Afar, Somali, Benishangul Gumuz (BSG) and Gambella. This was the so-called 'commune' programme, under which dispersed or mobile communities in more sparsely populated areas were concentrated in new villages. Finally, over the past 10–15 years, the gathering pace of infrastructural investment and developmental change has seen increasing numbers of farmers and pastoralists displaced across the country and for a range of reasons. These include urban sprawl, the demand for investment land and the appropriation of territory to allow for the construction of new national architecture: roads, railway tracks, industrial parks, and hydropower dams and their reservoirs. In this latter category, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance (or Millennium) Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile, on which this paper focuses, is the largest, but not the first of Ethiopia's infrastructure mega-projects. It has been under construction in the BSG National Regional State (NRS) in northwestern Ethiopia, some 15 kilometres from the Sudanese border, since 20 March 2012. Its reservoir is projected to cover an area of 1,874 km², displacing a population of around 20,000 people.

1.2 A dam on the Blue Nile

Ethiopian interest in the establishment of hydropower capacity on the Blue Nile goes back to the 1920s, when studies were first conducted (McCann, cited in Milas, 2013, p 27),¹ but a concrete plan only began to be implemented in 2011.² As Ethiopia's flagship hydropower

¹ Plans were taken up again in the 1960s, with the US Bureau of Reclamation proposing a series of four major dams. The Dergue announced further plans in the 1980s, with the African Development Bank (ADB) apparently willing to finance a number, until Egypt intervened to block the project (Lavers, 2019, p 6).

² In 2011 and 2012, Ethiopia was arguably fortunate that, after a decade of planning, the first steps to begin the construction of the GERD were taken at a time of political turmoil in Egypt following the removal of President Mubarak and the Arab Spring. They followed an intensive period during which Ethiopia had sought to align the interests of other riparian countries behind a campaign to review the allocation of water-use rights among upper-riparian countries. The commencement of GERD construction coincided with Ethiopia's first national Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP I) covering the period 2010–15, under which the so-called 'developmental state' ratcheted up public investment in infrastructure to hitherto unprecedented levels.

project, the GERD was central to the ambitious objectives of the country's developmental state, in terms both of domestic socioeconomic transformation, and of regional integration.

To date, academic and international interest in the GERD has focused on two areas. At the macro level, much attention has been paid to the geopolitical dynamics associated with the dam, and the changes in the relationships among riparian countries it will bring about. In particular, the likely impact of the GERD on the existing balance of power between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt has generated much commentary, academic and otherwise (see, for instance, Milas, 2013; El-Nashar & Elyamany, 2018; Yohannes et al, 2017). Recently attention has begun to shift to reservoir filling principles, and the potential for cooperative water management (Wheeler et al, 2018).

Meanwhile, at the micro level, there has been a small amount of commentary speculating on the social and environmental impact on communities expected to be displaced by the GERD and (more importantly) by the large associated reservoir (International Rivers, 2012). This connects with an emerging literature on other instances of resettlement in Ethiopia, where the focus has been increasingly on "development-induced displacement" (Cernea, 2009, p xxvii). Pankhurst & Piguët's important collection of studies documents this shift (2009b, pp xxxiii, xxxiv; 2009c, pp 13–16). In particular, the experiences of settlement schemes associated with Ethiopia's other hydro-dam projects have begun to be documented, notably those on the Gibe/Omo river (Kassahun Kebede, 2009 Abbink, 2012).

1.3 Research approach and rationale

This working paper situates the resettlement experiences of the Gumuz communities who are in the process of being displaced by the GERD reservoir in the context of the wider discussions of resettlement in Ethiopia and internationally. We draw on Cernea (1997, 2000), Turton (2009), Pankhurst (2009) and Pankhurst and Piguët (2009b, p xxxiii) in our typology of issues affecting the resettlement programme, as well as on a useful recent FutureDAMS review of the global literature on dam-induced displacement and resettlement (DIDR) (Hay et al, 2019).

As well as these secondary sources, our paper draws on two periods of research conducted in November 2018 and January 2019 in Ethiopia's BSG and Amhara NRSs. We prioritised discussions with members of the Gumuz who are expected to be displaced by the GERD reservoir and filling process (male and female, and of different ages) in Metekel on the northern bank of the Blue Nile; but we also spoke to a series of local and regional administrators and policy makers responsible for their welfare. We conducted 36 interviews and seven focus groups during the course of brief visits to locations accessible by vehicle: Jadiya and Jemareh *kebeles* at Kong, and Wembera *wereda* centre, at Debre Zeit; and Yarenger and Babizenda *kebeles*, and Guba *wereda* centre, at Mankush.

The year 2018–19 was a difficult one in the development of the GERD: political change meant that a range of apparent problems associated with the construction and its

management became abruptly public and attracted great controversy.³ Just before our main field research, in December 2018, the Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), quoted the GERD's new Project Manager, Engineer Kifle Horo, as saying that the GERD would be now be completed according to a new schedule in 2022. Just after our fieldwork, in February 2019, it was reported that new Chinese contractors had been recruited to replace METEC in pre-commissioning activities.

Meanwhile, 2018–19 also proved an intensely challenging period for the BSG NRS and many of its communities, and our research visits were redesigned and rescheduled several times. From late September 2018, areas of western Oromia, East and West Wellega, and Kamashi zone in BSG, including communities close to the Nile, were affected by serious conflict, which also made research access to settlement sites south of the river impossible. After we had completed our fieldwork in January 2019, meanwhile, lethal conflict erupted between Gumuz communities in Metekel zone and Jawi *wereda* in Agaw Awi zone in Amhara NRS, and their highland neighbours. This closed road access from the north from April/May.

This is a working paper. We hope it will form a useful initial basis for further discussion and research – with our academic colleagues but also with policy- and decision makers, by whom much more could be done to improve the situation of this group of citizens in the frontline of developmental change. The hot lowland areas bordering the Nile in Metekel and Kamashi are particularly difficult to work in, with exceptionally limited infrastructure in terms of roads, power and telecoms. Our research visit was short, but furthered our understanding of just how remote and challenging this area is: our work offers a snapshot of the situation in early 2019, which should ideally be revisited periodically as the affected communities evolve over the coming years and decades, along with the GERD and the reservoir. We hope this paper will help stimulate what should be a much deeper and continuing process of investigation and understanding of diverse interests, needs and aspirations in these areas.

1.4 Setting out the problem

An entrenched global narrative sees the construction of hydroelectric dams as involving a trade-off between benefits at the national level and negative consequences locally. This disconnect poses particularly complex questions in a federal context such as Ethiopia, where the national interest of the federal government in power and revenue generation intersects with diverse regional and local interests, including, for instance, service delivery and social welfare; job creation, training and economic opportunities; the range of spin-off effects (social, economic, technological) from infrastructural investment; and the impact of an abrupt shift in the pattern of access to key natural resources, notably land and water. Lavers (2019, p 26) has noted that:

³ In late July 2018 the GERD's widely liked Chief Engineer Simegnew Bekele was found dead in Addis Ababa, and in September an official finding of suicide was delivered, itself also controversial. Over the summer, criticism had mounted of the state-owned Metals and Engineering Corporation (METEC), charged with the delivery of key elements of electro-mechanical investment, and in August its contracts were revoked. By November 2018 its chief executive and a number of other senior officials were arrested on corruption charges.

GERD raises the possibility of a major infrastructure project, conducted as part of a centralised development strategy, being conducted in a politically marginal area to the detriment of the people inhabiting the area.

Our analysis suggests that, despite investment earmarked for resettlement, and considered planning, this is indeed what is playing out in practice on the ground. However, we also indicate ways in which a careful review and modification of the detailed implementation of the strategy (in line with key tenets of the global literature, and national and international learning) could improve the situation to benefit the resettled population. Pankhurst and Piguet discuss complex “concerns over [community] re-establishment and adaptation” arising from flooding and displacement of people living within the areas of hydro-dam reservoirs (2009d, p 251). Kassahun Kebede’s findings (2009, p 65) on resettlement around the Gibe dams, for instance, provide a particularly resonant introductory warning, usefully drawing attention to the importance of sustained investigation and analysis of the effects of DIDR over time:

At first sight it might seem that the relocatees responded well to impoverishment risks. However, the risks on the ground were quite different. In relation to land, all households received equal amounts of land regardless of household size, composition and ability to plough. This was particularly insensitive to the expectations of young people coming of age ... Ironically, too, the social planning was faulty. Housing arrangements ignored the previous settlement patterns and increased social scale, which affected harmonious relations. Furthermore, political disempowerment was unmitigated in the rehabilitation process. In general, risk management at the project level attempted to respond more to the blueprinted risks than to how the risks manifested themselves on the ground, with little attempt to explore people’s readiness to help themselves.

The devil is always in the empirical detail. Although we conclude that not all of these problems were in play in the GERD case, and that some attempts have clearly been made to learn lessons from the resettlement mistakes of the past, nevertheless our research documents the strong continuity of top-down, distant, elitist and exclusionary decision making which continues to shape Ethiopian resettlement policy making in this instance. More broadly, this places our findings squarely in line with key threads of the wider literature on the global impact of large dams (Hay et al, 2019). The paper briefly explores six sets of problems: (1) resettled communities’ access to social services; (2) their access to common resources, notably human and animal drinking water; (3) the protection of their land, housing, property and compensation; (4) livelihoods impacts and prospects in a changed environment; (5) changes in social and community articulation; and (6) issues of coordination planning, budgeting and ownership among multiple stakeholders.

It is important to note that all these issues have also been identified in the literature on other cases of resettlement, both in Ethiopia (*cf.* Piguet & Pankhurst, 2009a and on DIDR internationally (*cf.* Hay et al, 2019). We preface the discussion by introducing BSG NRS within the Ethiopian federation, and draw attention to a brutal history of slaving, exploitation and marginalisation. This has characterised historical relations between the Gumuz and the Ethiopian state, and continues to resonate in the present, calling for particular sensitivity. We briefly conclude the paper by drawing attention to areas for further consideration by policy makers and researchers, including gender and community inclusion, ongoing resource and

revenue sharing for sustainable development, and local ownership of planning and development processes.

2 Context: the Gumuz of Metekel

2.1 Benishangul Gumuz within the federation

BSG NRS is a relatively young political entity, in an area which – both relatively recently and over the historical *longue durée* – has been marginalised and disproportionately affected by violence (Mesfin, 2012; Vaughan, 2007; Vaughan et al, 2020). It was established along with the FDRE system of multinational federalism in the 1990s, and in 1997 it was categorised as one of four ‘developing’ or ‘emerging’ federated units entitled to special federal support.⁴ With an estimated population of around one million, the region comprises three zones (Assosa, Kamashi and Metekel) and a special *wereda* (Mao Komo).⁵

The BSG constitution, while recognising the presence of other groups, protects the rights of five so-called ‘indigenous’ groups considered to be ‘owner’ nationalities of the region: Berta, Gumuz, Komo, Mao and Shinasha. These populations (a scant majority of the total population in the 1997 census, and less in 2007) are unevenly spread across the region, with the greatest population density in Assosa zone. The Gumuz are concentrated in two zones: Metekel north of the Blue Nile, where they interact primarily with Amhara and Agaw people, alongside Shinasha populations, and Kamashi on its southern bank, where their neighbours are predominantly Oromo. Indigeneity and the balance of power between identity groups has been a vector of controversy and tension in the region; meanwhile, the formal political empowerment of ‘indigenous’ community representatives has not been matched by these groups’ economic advancement or by local service delivery to them.

Relatively scarcely populated, BSG NRS has long been perceived as a source of ‘free land’ available both for investors and to ‘incomer’ farmers.⁶ This is a longstanding external perception. It encouraged the resettlement of populations from highland Ethiopia into Pawe and Assosa zone during the Dergue period; it has continued to encourage informal farmer migration from neighbouring highland regions over many years,⁷ triggering controversy and resistance; and it has driven the identification of 1.4 million hectares of land by the federal government as suitable for investment.⁸ The perception underlies contemporary assumptions about the availability of abundant land for incomer livelihoods or for developmental purposes such as the GERD and its vast reservoir.

⁴ The others were Afar, Somali, and Gambella NRSs, also lowland pastoral areas.

⁵ Pawe under Metekel zone was for some time also established as a ‘special *wereda*’, reflecting the high proportion of highland residents and settlers following Dergue resettlement in the 1980s. A *wereda* is Ethiopia’s lowest constitutionally recognized level of local administration or district.

⁶ Commentators have rightly noted, of course, that “‘free land’ is not found but created” (Lavers, cited in Labzae, 2015).

⁷ Gumuz, Mao and Komo land use patterns of shifting cultivation, and sparser populations have proved particularly permeable to highland settled agriculture (Berihun, 1996, 2004; Gebre Yntiso, 1995, 2003).

⁸ In a context of ongoing villagisation, land certification and fears of expropriation, almost half a million hectares had been transferred to the Federal Land Bank by 2013 and more than a quarter allocated to investors (Labzae, 2015).

During the early 1990s “instability and corruption” characterised “the legacy of violence in a territory which [during the 1980s] had probably suffered more from warfare than any other part of Ethiopia except Tigray” (Young, 1997). BSG NRS has been influenced by the politics and warfare of neighbouring areas of Sudan and South Sudan and the state played host to around 63,000 refugees in five camps in 2019 (Vaughan et al, 2020).

Controversies over the regional state’s establishment and borders have dogged it periodically since 1991, and recurred in the period between mid-2018 and mid-2019. Before the federal dispensation,⁹ the areas north of the Blue Nile (Metekel, Pawe) formed part of a predominantly Orthodox and Amhara Gojjam region or province (*kifle hager/teklay gezat*), while those south of the river (Assosa, Kamashi, Mao Komo) were historically part of the predominantly protestant Wellega zone, closely identified with important aspects of Oromo identity and culture. The separation of BSG NRS from these two historically and ideationally important entities was controversial, and provoked violent conflict during the early 1990s.

More recently, the situation has deteriorated again, and conflict and controversy returned abruptly to the fore, as noted above.¹⁰ Conflict between Gumuz populations and their neighbours south and north of the Nile is closely linked in the minds of many BSG NRS interlocutors with a shift in the balance of power within the federation: this forms a highly salient backdrop to analysis of the actors involved with the resettlement programme. A range of interviewees saw the establishment of the BSG NRS in 1991 as championed by the EPRDF, and particularly by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which was then overwhelmingly influential. Recent challenges have coincided with a period during which the relative weight of neighbouring Oromo and Amhara regional ruling parties increased at federal level, especially *vis-à-vis* the TPLF: rightly or wrongly, these shifted circumstances are correlated in the minds of many observers, and for some in the BSG NRS, this has been a source of great anxiety.

In this volatile context, the very significant federal investment represented by the GERD in the relatively small and under-developed BSG NRS, raises a range of questions about the federal balance of power: about future revenue sharing; about the potential of the GERD to strengthen the hand of a relatively weaker federal player, bringing about a rebalancing of power among existing federated units; about the temptation to increase central control of the investment to preclude this; and finally about the potential impact of these various calculations on local interests, and the prospects for inclusive development. The perceptions

⁹ And before the PDRE period from 1987 at the end of the Dergue.

¹⁰ To the south of the Nile, Gumuz–Oromo conflict following a series of assassinations closed the road between Nekempt and Assosa for many months in late 2018, and occasionally flared again during 2019. Meanwhile, to the north media reports have suggested the killing of large numbers of Gumuz in Jawi and border areas with Amhara NRS in April following deaths across communities, including Agaw and Amhara. See ‘Dozens killed in ethnic clashes in Ethiopia regional officials say’. AP, as reported in Times of Israel, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/dozens-killed-in-ethnic-clashes-in-ethiopia-regional-official-says/>. A further 50 Gumuz were reported to have been killed in the area in the wake of political assassinations in Bahr Dar on 22 June 2019. “Dozens” killed in failed Ethiopia coup attempt’. Reuters, 26 June 2019, <https://af.reuters.com/article/ethiopiaNews/idAFL8N23X38N>.

and interests of politically powerful upstream neighbours on each bank of the Blue Nile retained strong sway over the federal calculus at the time of research in early 2019.

2.2 Metekel zone north of the Blue Nile

Metekel zone shares borders with West Gondar zone to the north,¹¹ Agaw Awi 'special zone' to the west (both in Amhara NRS), the Blue Nile and Kamashi zone of BSG to the south, and Sudan to the west. It is made up of six *weredas*, with GERD reservoir flooding due to affect two of them: Guba and Wembera. Until the bridge over the Nile at Yarenger was built in 2009–10 at an altitude of around 500 metres, travel between Assosa and the zone capital at Gilgel Beles involved a round trip of some 2,290 kms via Bure and Nekempt in the neighbouring states. Once the GERD is constructed, this road and bridge will be flooded, and a new (marginally longer) route established, bridging the river across the main dam and saddle dam itself, skirting the reservoir and linking Assosa and Kamashi zones with Mankush town (Guba) and beyond to Gilgel Beles and Chagni.¹²

Metekel zone occupies an estimated land area of 22,028 km², at altitudes ranging from 500–600 metres along the Sudan border, in the area of the GERD, up to 2,731 metres at Belaya Mountain, and 2,488masl at Dangur Mountain, in the northeast of the zone. Most of the area, 82%, is classified as lowland (*kolla*),¹³ and these low, hot, forested plains which slope down towards the Sudanese border in the west are home to the Gumuz populations who will be displaced by the reservoir on its northern bank. Most Gumuz practise a system of shifting hoe cultivation, supported also by fishing, livestock and panning for alluvial gold. Higher escarpments to the east are populated by a mix of Gumuz, highland settlers (most from Wello, Tigray and Kambatta), Shinasha, and neighbouring Oromo, Agaw, and Amhara.

2.3 The Gumuz past in the present

Richard Pankhurst's account of the western borderlands quotes a number of sources describing the Gumuz as the "aborigines of Abyssinia" (1997, p 27), and the earliest inhabitants of present-day Ethiopia. The Gumuz history of marginalisation is relatively well known (Gonzales Nunez, 2015), as is their reputation for violent conflict. Less widely understood is the barbarity of their historical experiences at the hands of other actors. Contacts between the Gumuz and a forerunner of the Ethiopian state are recorded as far back as the Axumite kingdom, with which they and other similar groups were in "constant conflict", being heavily raided as slaves as far back as the fifth century. As one interlocutor noted:

There is a wound in Gumuz hearts: they remember the terrible experiences they had in the past. (Interview, Assosa, December 2006)

Academic analysts of the Gumuz concur:

¹¹ Previously Simien Gondar; the area was re-divided in 2019.

¹² Little is yet known of plans for other transport linkages by boat, either bisecting the reservoir north–south, or allowing navigation along its 250 km length.

¹³ By the Regional Bureau of Agriculture.

Violent conflicts are not merely a result of resource competition, but they encompass several factors which are inherited from the past (Berihun, 2004, p 19) Slaving practices and institutions do not belong to a remote past and are not yet faded experiences (p 13)

Berihun Mebratie (2004, 61ff) documents this history in graphic detail. Pankhurst and Berihun also document reports of fierce resistance by the Gumuz. In almost all cases over the centuries, this resistance seems only to have brought ever more brutal force from the highlands. During the 18th and 19th centuries, meanwhile, slave-raiding also began to be practised from the west, by the kingdom around Gubba, in what is now Sudan (James, 2002, p 121).

Under the modern imperial state, Ethiopian expansion and attempts to conquer the lowlands along what is now the Ethio-Sudanese frontier brought great political change, and increased the demands placed on the neighbouring Gubba sultanate. In 1898, for instance 1,000 slaves were sent to Addis Ababa, and in subsequent years the demands for tribute increased even further (James, 2002, 122; Garretson, 1980). These changes provoked refugee movements, and widespread depopulation of the area towards the Blue Nile, to the extent that, by 1929, “the whole region seems to have been emptied” (James, 2002, p 128), with many Gumuz fleeing across the river into what is now Kamashi.

After the Second World War, ill-treatment of what the Gojjam rulers then still referred to as the ‘*shankalla*’ (or slave) population continued to be extreme north of the Nile. Some contrast emerged with their treatment to the south, where the growing Wellega protestant churches and missionaries encouraged the incorporation and mixing of Gumuz and Oromo populations. Although the trade in slaves had been officially abolished in Ethiopia, slaving continued throughout the imperial period, with a report from 1976 indicating that it was still widely practised in the northwest of the country (Tadesse Negash, cited in Berihun, 2004, p 67). In addition, pressure on Gumuz land from the highland side also continued, and in the 1960s local resistance to encroachment was destroyed and the Gumuz were disarmed. The following decade, the new Dergue government cleared 73,000 hectares for cultivation and established mechanised state farms on land which had been used by Gumuz populations for shifting cultivation, later incorporating them into the resettlement sites, where 82,000 highlanders were settled in 48 villages. Gebre Yntiso (2009, p 119) concludes that “the overall impact [of the Tana Beles project and Pawe resettlement] on the settlers and the Gumuz was tremendously painful”. This history clearly fed resentment and resistance, such that, when state administrative structures were remodelled on the principle of ‘self-determination of nationalities’ under federalism, the stage was set for a violent process of ‘redressing the balance’ and the 1990s saw a series of retaliatory clashes and murders.

Tsega Endalew (2006) documents an ongoing history of violent relations between the Gumuz, and their Shinasha, Agaw, Amhara and Oromo neighbours. Pressure on land from settlers and migrants did not cease with the change of government in 1991. Large numbers of Agaw and Amhara migrants from neighbouring areas have continued to push into land traditionally regarded by the Gumuz as theirs. In addition, the leasing of large areas by investors has placed further constraints on land availability.

An understanding of Gumuz history, and of their experiences of relations with neighbours and with external actors, including the state, provides essential context for those seeking to

plan inclusive development among them, in the wake of the construction of the GERD and its reservoir on land in Metekel and Kamashi that the Gumuz have long regarded as theirs. A traditional Gumuz response to threats over the centuries has been to retreat further into the hot wooded lowland valleys of the Blue Nile and its tributaries. The GERD and its reservoir will confront and confound this longstanding strategy in an entirely new way.

3 The GERD resettlement programme

As noted in the introduction, a wider programme of villagisation, commonly referred to as the 'commune programme' has been taking place in much of BSG since 2010, and this massive initiative, potentially covering more than 10 times as many settlers as the DIDR in BSG, forms a backdrop to the GERD resettlement programme.¹⁴ Interviews in Assosa suggested that GERD resettlement has been able to learn lessons from the regular programme, and interviews in Guba and Wembera *weredas* confirmed the activities of the local government in organising it.¹⁵ Their reports suggest the strong continuity of state-driven, centre-driven, villagisation approaches, which focus on the completion of technical investments rather than on solutions to social issues, while many of the problems noted foreshadow issues we have also identified in the GERD programme during fieldwork:¹⁶ there is little in the available literature examining the deeper social, cultural, economic and developmental impact of the programme.

The resettlement plan specifically associated with the GERD development, meanwhile, began in 2013, and is coordinated by the Federal GERD Project Office, associated with the Ethiopian Electric Power (EEP) investment authority.¹⁷ It requires that populations living below 645 metres be resettled to sites above that altitude (currently, the altitude of the river, where it flows under the bridge at Yarenger is around 500–525 metres). The regional government in BSG see the establishment of the GERD and its 260 km-long reservoir as a significant challenge, not least because of its enormous projected scale:

One of the key challenges for the dam construction and creation of the lake is that the area where the dam will be built is relatively flat, which means that it is a relatively wide area which will be flooded. Hence also the need for the saddle dam. Although it is sparsely populated, the lake will displace people from a large area. One could say, for instance, that around 80% of Guba *wereda* is likely to be underwater. Tsedal *wereda* in Kamashi zone will also be significantly affected. (BSG NRS regional leadership, interviewed in Assosa, November 2018)

¹⁴ The programme aims to settle 45,000 family households in villages, with 42,365 reportedly moved as of November 2018. In addition, the expansion of Assosa town was displacing a further 1,200 households, and 1,526 had been moved to make way for a sugar plantation. In a context where significant agricultural land has at the same time been made available to commercial investors, commune villagisation has of course also proved controversial. See Labzae (2015).

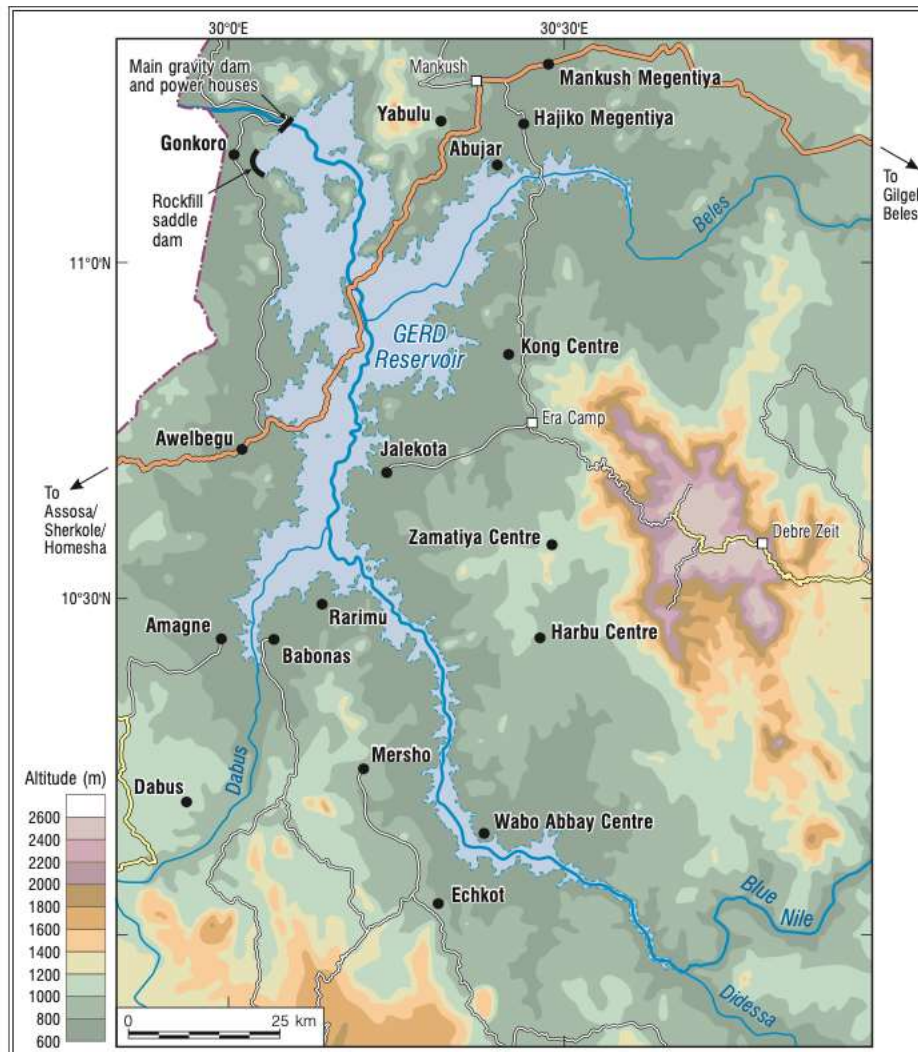
¹⁵ It was particularly visible in Wembera *wereda*, where much work has focused on highland areas, in those parts of the *wereda* which are easier for the *wereda* authorities to access.

¹⁶ The programme reports indicate that construction of infrastructure for social services was slow and service provision was late; sector offices worked behind schedule; *wereda* reporting was inaccurate and weak; many settlers were not keen to move, and as many as 2,700 returned to their old villages from 63 centres in 10 *weredas*; and many grinding mills (53) broke down and remained out of use, etc.

¹⁷ Commonly referred to by its old acronym EELPA – Ethiopian Electric Light and Power Authority.

The joint plan of the Federal GERD Project Office and the BSG NRS government is that a total of 5,391 households (approximately 20,000 people) will be moved from 14 locations in six *weredas*, and that they will be resettled into 17 new villages or settlement centres. The programme began to be implemented in 2013, 2014 and 2015;¹⁸ at the time of research in late 2018–early 2019, 14 villages out of these 17 new resettlement centres had been established: four in Guba (Metekel zone); one in Menge (Assosa zone); five in Tsedal (Kamashi zone); and four in Wembera (Metekel zone) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Approximate location of the resettlement sites in relation to the river and planned reservoir



In Guba *wereda* all four of the new sites have been established along the asphalt road to Gilgel Beles, and the population has reportedly moved to the new centre in three out of the four cases: Babizenda (marked as Mankush Megentiya on Figure 1), Fanguso and Giadiya. In Yarenger only half the population has so far moved from the original site. In Wembera

¹⁸ Although the initial surveys and inventories of property seem to have begun in 2010/11.

wereda, populations from eight *kebeles* are being moved into five new sites,¹⁹ of which four were reportedly already established, although only one is accessible and could be visited: the location at Kong on the new (federal) all-weather road linking Guba to Debre Zeit.

The federal GERD Project Office had made available ETB 815 million to the regional state government for implementation of the capital costs of the project,²⁰ and a further ETB 890 million was reported to be available for ongoing livelihood development, once an agreement was signed. Of the 5,391 households due to be resettled under the project, the regional authorities estimated that around 3,200 households had moved by late 2018. The regional Food Security and Environmental Protection (FS&EP) office under the Bureau of Agriculture supported a regional technical committee with a steering committee chaired by the regional President; but (unlike for the regular commune programme) the primary decision maker and budget-holder remained the federal government.

Our research indicated that *wereda* (local district) authorities have been key in the identification of new resettlement sites. While many interlocutors stressed the involvement of the communities themselves in the selection of sites, this was not borne out in interviews. Rather, in Guba *wereda*, for instance, officials have been keen to relocate the settlers along the main asphalt road. This may have other advantages in due course, but at present leaves settlers stranded, often without water, in circumstances with which they are extremely unhappy, as discussed below. In Wembera *wereda*, only one of the sites (Kong) is on a road with vehicle access, and this also suffers from problems of water access. Once locations had been identified and agreed upon, and fed into the Project Plan, interviews suggested that there has been little flexibility over revisions, even in the face of very serious constraints on water or logistics. The main points of our findings are now summarised in six areas, looking in turn at the delivery of services; at access to common resources; at issues of land property and compensation; at questions related to livelihoods; at community articulation and dynamics in the changed environment; and at stakeholder coordination and planning.

3.1 Access to social services

As often in resettlement programmes, both in Ethiopia and with DIDR globally, the provision of buildings for offices and new social facilities has been comparatively relatively successful: more difficult has been staffing and equipping them with skilled professionals to provide effective services. Modern buildings for offices, schools, clinics and grinding mills have been constructed but in a number of cases stand empty. While the buildings are appreciated locally, there is concern that the standard square concrete constructions with corrugated metal roofing may be inappropriate to local climatic conditions, overheating where traditional thatched *tukuls* remain cool. A second concern is the lack of functioning facilities for grinding mills in each of the sites visited, an absence which suggests inadequate attention to gendered needs within the community. The provision of new facilities for social services only at the resettlement centres (and removal of provision at the old community locations) has been used as a tool to encourage communities to move to the new sites: for instance,

¹⁹ Giadiya, Jemareh and Gori '*goŕ*' (sub-*kebele*) of Mu-uz *kebele* are moving to Kong; Asembenet and Gojjam Sese *kebeles* are moving to Jelekota; Wabo Abbay to Gichindira; Guley Abbay '*goŕ*' is moving to the *kebele* centre at Zamatia; and Dagadima '*goŕ*' is moving to the *kebele* centre at Hargu.

²⁰ A total infrastructure spend of about US\$5,400 per household on the January 2019 exchange rate.

primary schools are no longer functional in Yarenger and the more remote communities of Wembera.

In the Kong resettlement centre (Wembera), a school which was supposed to provide education for grades 1–8 had been constructed, but was only providing for grades 1–7, because the number of teachers was inadequate.²¹ A further ten additional teachers were reportedly required to provide education at full capacity. The school administration had asked to hire additional teachers, but had been told by the local authorities that there was no budget to cover this. Textbooks and reference materials were also a problem (with no teacher or resources for physics beyond one textbook borrowed from another school in the *wereda*). The school also had no access to running water. Regardless of these problems, many people still wanted to stay in the new settlement area. This was primarily because it had been more than four years since they had left their previous settlements. Almost all of them had started land cultivation and harvesting crops in the new settlement areas, and they knew they would not be able to access schools for their children in their old sites.

In a number of resettlement sites, settlers considered that they had been promised electricity. This is a particular controversy in Guba *wereda*, where power lines run along the main road to Gilgel Beles, location of several of the new settlements, but the sites are not connected and have no supply.²² Electrification in BSG NRS confronts some serious logistical challenges, which may or may not be eased or resolved with the recent reconstitution of the Ethiopian Electricity Utility (EEU) structure at regional level. Officials may have over-promised the local community, but the lack of evidence of any serious intention to provide electricity is particularly ironic, given the rationale for the dam and reservoir. The following observation captures community frustration about service delivery:

Although we have come to the Kong [resettlement] centre, I don't think you can really say that it was the government that brought us here. We have done everything ourselves. There was no one to help us. When we came here there was no health post, or anything. This isn't good for us. When they made the meeting with us in Wembera, they didn't neglect anything [that they were planning to provide for us]. But when we came they just put us here with nothing. (Giadiya *kebele* community FG, Kong, January 2019)

3.2 Access to common resources: a crisis of water

The establishment of sustainable water-supply points is a notorious problem in BSG NRS, where the geology is such that, while the region has relatively plentiful (seasonal) surface water, there are severe constraints on accessing ground water. This is a problem which confronts many development initiatives in the regional state, where populations are settled in substantial groups, including both the regular commune programme (according to interviewees in Guba and Wembera *weredas*) and refugee service delivery (Vaughan et al, 2020; also interviewees in BSG BoWIE, Assosa, Amhara BoWIE and Bahr Dar, November 2018). The GERD resettlement programme is no different: much more than any other issue, the provision of access to water is a crippling problem which undermines the success of all other activities and investments in what can only be described as a fundamental manner.

²¹ It had a total of 384 students, of whom over half were enrolled in grades 1 and 2.

²² Even the *wereda* capital, Mankush, has only a limited and intermittent supply from the same line.

For instance, in Yarenger and Babizenda, there is absolutely no spring of any kind in the new settlement areas, and that means that it is very difficult for them to bring their animals to the new settlements. Or even to live there themselves. (Guba wereda officials, interviewed in Mankush, January 2018)

Water supply in all of the new settlement centres is extremely problematic: this results in a shortage of drinking water for animals and humans. The gendered and labour implications of this central obstacle also seem likely to be significant and should be a focus of further scrutiny and investigation. The wider socio-cultural importance of water and the river for the Gumuz lineages who have been used to living along its banks is clearly key. Community frustration was borne out by the research, especially at Babizenda, where the community members interviewed were extremely angry about the issue of water.

Now that we have been brought here we aren't even able to wash our clothes every week. They talk about development but we didn't get water, so how can we function? We came here believing the word of the government but now we are supposed to live here: how can we do that with no water? When we came, the government asked us where we wanted to live, and we said that we wanted to live where there is water. But they said that the road will be good for you because you can get electricity and transport and they promised to bring us water.

We said no, because we knew right from the beginning that there was no water here. It is impossible to keep animals when there is no water. We have basically had to get rid of our animals, and either we have sold them or they have died. Now from our community there is no one who still lives in our previous area. Completely the whole community has moved here as they told us. But we know that if they dig a thousand times they will not get water here. So they put us here without doing any research ... They said that, if we came here, then women would be able to give birth getting transportation, and we would have the benefit of the road. But the government is joking on us, at our expense [*'mengist yechowetebenal'*]. (Babizenda *kebele* FG, January 2019)

In Wembera too, local authorities and resettled communities are extremely concerned about the problem of sustainable sources of water. Of a total of 28 boreholes dug at the four GERD settlement sites so far established in the *wereda*, only 17 were working.²³

Focus groups indicated clearly that resettled communities want to stay close to the river so that they can water their animals; and that they also want to ensure that they will have the land alongside the new reservoir once it is filled. At present, many strongly suspect that others will take the banks of the new lake when it is filled. This is a further critical factor discouraging some from moving (see below).

3.3 Land, property and compensation

The research encountered few concerns about the provision of alternative plots of farmland to settlers,²⁴ over and above the vexed issue of sustainable water sources discussed above. There were concerns about the architecture of the new residential houses constructed under the GERD resettlement programme. Several interlocutors commented that the modern

²³ Six out of eight at Jalekota; six out of nine at Kong; five out of eight at Mu'uz; and neither of the two dug at Harbo.

²⁴ This issue would bear a more detailed and ethnographic examination, not least because of the importance of territory in Gumuz social organisation (Berihun Mebratie, 2004, p 70).

design (square concrete or daub, with corrugated iron roofs) does not suit the extreme heat. Unlike the regular commune programme, GERD resettlement involves the payment of financial compensation to the farmers being moved, over and above the provision of replacement plots of land, and this has proved to be one of the most complicated and contested aspects of the process. BSG regional decision makers and officials noted that:

It is the federal government that pays the compensation, so we don't get involved or know how much it is. (BSG BoA, November 2018)

There are three sectors involved in the calculation of the compensation: Natural Resources, the [GERD federal] project office, and the *wereda* office. They make the calculation of the compensation at the *wereda* level, and the money which is allocated covers the housing construction costs, because the resettlers are given new land in kind [i.e. they don't need to be financially compensated for their land]. Once the calculations have been made they send their reports to us. But the money is not paid directly. The households have to open accounts with the CBE [Central Bank of Ethiopia, Abbay Branch in Bambza for those in Guba *wereda* and in Debre Zeit the capital for Wembera *wereda*], and they are paid out from those accounts in phases, and with monitoring from the local government. (BSG FS&EP office, November 2018)

Four central problems or complaints associated with the compensation process emerged during research. First, settlers and *wereda* officials did not consider the process to have been completed as higher officials claimed, with many individuals allegedly left out of the process. This was reportedly particularly true of a young generation of newly establishing farmers, who were apparently excluded from the distribution.

In Yarenger there are 160 people who are young and single [out of the total population of 3,360 in the community] and they were not entitled to any compensation. (Yarenger community elders FG02, January 2019)

This situation is reminiscent of a problem identified in resettlement programming elsewhere in Ethiopia by Pankhurst (2009) and Kassahun (2009).

Second, the process of valuation which preceded compensation payments raised expectations across the settler communities that were not fulfilled when payments were made. Evaluation by a compensation estimation committee, a claim-checking committee, and (later) a compensation grievance committee covered all the communities' assets, including fruit trees, animals, religious buildings, and so on. Each was recorded in a process that reportedly began as far back as 2003–04 (in the Ethiopian calendar (EC) – 2010–12 in the Western calendar), and rumours about a range of rates for each asset floated around the communities.

There was a committee of seven members who were selected. Those people went and got the information from the community about how much property they had. They went in 2004EC and counted everything ... They put houses, trees, etc into the list. (Yarenger community elders FG02, January 2019)

In the event, payments three years later were restricted to a standard unit cost for a single house per household.

They said that they would give *kassa* [compensation] for those who moved but many didn't get it, and those who did get *kassa* didn't get enough. No one got more than sixty

thousand birr, and you can't build a house with that amount of money. Plus, even if you build you will have nothing left for animals or chicken ... people have had to sell their animals to pay for it. And in any case they only had a few. (Community elders FG02, January 2019)

In Yarenger, *kassa* [compensation] has been paid but the population have complained about the amount they have received which is much less than they were expecting. They say that "it's not even enough for tea" ... Our people live in grass/thatch houses, which are relatively small. So they were given *kassa* for 64 square metres to allow them to improve their lives. It was calculated that an amount of ETB41,600 (ETB650 x 64) [just under US\$1,500] should be the minimum payment for a house/*tukul*. But they have often only been paid for this, and not for any other property or crops they have lost. (Interview, Guba *wereda*, Mankush, January 2019)

Third, the system of 'managed access' to compensation payments has infuriated many of those in receipt of bank books, and has complicated relations with the local authorities, with a range of interviewees claiming that they were being cheated in various different ways. In Guba for instance:

The *wereda* is responsible in some way for the management of the fund. There is a block account: if [the settlers] want to take the money they have to bring a plan, otherwise they aren't allowed to withdraw it. They have to say what it is that they are going to do with the money that they want to withdraw: for instance, building houses, etc. This also creates a lot of obstacles. (Interview, Guba *wereda*, Mankush, January 2019)

While there may be good reasons for this managed arrangement, it has provided ample room for suspicion about cheating and embezzlement to emerge. In Wembera, the situation is even more complicated, as the logistics of reaching the *wereda* capital at Debre Zeit (located 1,500 metres higher than the *kebeles* being resettled) are challenging and expensive; and because funds for house construction have been levied directly from the bank accounts and passed to contractors who were widely reported to have delivered sub-standard buildings in the new centres at Kong.

We are paid ETB 30,000, 40,000 or 50,000 depending on the individual, but even that payment has been reduced by ETB 30,000 for the cost of the useless houses which was paid to the contractors. This is completely different from what we expected. We were thinking we were going to get something in excess of ETB 100,000 or 200,000. But when we got the payment it was much less, and some people went back to their original place. One of [those amongst the group] received ETB 49,000 but only ETB 10,000 came to him directly ... We always report the problems we have [to the *kebele* and the *wereda*]. But no one comes here to discuss our problems with us ... If we want to raise our problems we have to go there ... it costs ETB 200–300 to rent a motorcycle in order to get up to Wembera. Then you have the cost of staying in the town. It is hard to spend less than ETB 1,000 if you want to raise a complaint at the *wereda*, and that makes it very difficult for us to go. (Jemareh *kebele* community FG, Kong, January 2019)

But the most serious thing is the way that our compensation has been finished [used up] by the contractors (Giadiya *kebele* community FG, Kong, January 2019)

Distrust in Wembera *kebele* had escalated because entries in the bank books had been written by hand rather than by computer, as (various members of the community asserted) had been the case at sites at Sherkole on the southern bank of the Nile. Invidious

comparisons with the allegedly more generous provision allegedly made in other *kebeles* were a common feature of community narratives in all sites visited. Several such claims were not borne out by research observations, but they point to problems of expectation management and communication.

Finally, there were concerns about the extent to which women in the communities have been included in decision making or control over the allocation and use of compensation received. Skinner highlights the importance of a gender balanced approach in relation to the impact of compensation for resettlement on resources and production

During involuntary resettlement, traditional roles are challenged in two principal ways. First, whose assets (or production) are compensated and how? Second, how are men and women's household roles and contributions affected differently in efforts to restore their livelihoods? Compensation for lost production is usually paid to the household head, who is generally a man. Household assets, even in recent projects with support from multilateral development banks, have also been inventoried in the man's name even when belonging to, or used by, women. (Skinner, 2018, p 2)

In this instance, the two or three bank books examined at the resettlement site in Wembera were only in the name of the male household head, and the situation is yet more complicated because of polygamy, with some men retaining bank books on behalf of more than one household.²⁵ Research suggested that women's access to compensation and assets in these resettlement sites needed further consideration. Meanwhile, the significant degree of control exercised by local administrators over access to these funds (as discussed above) is a complicating issue here. On the one hand, it has arguably had the effect of disempowering community members of both genders; on the other, many of those closely involved with the communities defend it as a sensible precaution against reckless consumption by groups only now becoming integrated into a cash economy. As Skinner (2018, pp 3–4) rightly notes:

it is easy enough to rebuild infrastructure: harder to [encourage positive or inclusive] social and cultural norms and rebuild livelihoods ... Effective consideration of gender-specific response requires ... granular approaches to compensation and livelihood restoration, particularly to avoid deepening gender inequality.

3.4 Conceptualising the livelihoods of resettled communities

Some clear discrepancies and confusion emerge from the data regarding different actors' understanding of the livelihoods that resettled communities are expected to pursue in their new settlement locations. On the one hand, a number of higher-level officials noted that the communities should be moved close to roads and emerging urban centres, in order to begin to adopt more modern and connected ways of life, and move into new forms of employment. On the other hand, several interlocutors indicated that the provision of 'replacement land' of 5–6 hectares for the resettled farmers meant that they were expected to pursue hoe agriculture in the new sites, as previously in their original communities along the river.

²⁵ Interviews also suggested that payments had to be redone in some places because the signatures of women members of the household had not initially been included on the Bank Accounts (Notes taken in Yarenger, Guba *wereda*).

Hoe cultivation has been the major occupation and source of subsistence of the Metekel Gumuz, but has always been widely supplemented by other activities – including hunting (a ritual as well as an economic endeavour), beekeeping and poultry- and animal rearing – especially for those living along the riverbanks. Gathering plants and roots has mainly only been practised during the scarce period, when wild foods supplement the diet. Livestock are reared for food as well as ritual slaughter, and are largely left unattended (Berihun, 2004, pp 115, 118ff).

Most community members interviewed expected to continue with their farming livelihood after resettlement, but the lessons of global DIDR suggest that livelihoods support should underpin a menu of options which also suit those who choose to diversify or move into other economic sectors. For those who stay on the land, to be sustainable hoe cultivation needs to continue to be part of a more complex pattern of livelihood strategies, many of which are closely intertwined with proximity to the river. Other important sources of household income continue to include livestock, which the Gumuz in this area rear in large numbers, along the river; fishing; and the panning of alluvial gold from the riverbanks. None of these supplementary livelihood options was open to those who had accepted resettlement in the new centres at the time of research, and in several instances this had meant that some members of the community had remained behind at the original sites, where it was possible to continue to water livestock, to fish and to dig for gold. It will be important to monitor how this situation evolves as the reservoir is filled. Regional officials believe that gold mining will continue, and this is a clear focus of concern among some communities visited:

Some have questioned whether the local interest in the gold-mining industry will be a casualty of the creation of the lake, since many people pan gold from the riverside. But there is gold across a wide area, and we anticipate that, even after the lake is created, the population will be able to continue to pan gold at the lakeside. In fact the flooding process may unearth additional gold deposits. (Interview with the BSG Regional Leadership, Assosa, November 2018)

Over and above their significance in the livelihood strategies of those who live alongside them, the Blue Nile and Beles Rivers and their tributaries also play an important role in the Gumuz imaginary. Meron Zeleke's important study of gender among the Gumuz, for instance, notes that "Gumuz women give birth near rivers [it is] taboo to give birth near fields" (2010, p 36). There is little evidence that explicit consideration has been given to women's livelihoods and gendered labour norms and, as a result, it may well be that (as commonly elsewhere) interventions exacerbate rather than bridging existing gender gaps (Hay et al, 2019, p 16). At the Yarenger site in Guba *wereda*, close to the northern end of the existing Blue Nile bridge, meanwhile, a number of informants emphasised the importance of proximity to the river in influencing the local micro-climate and cooling the air temperature. It is arguable that some of these problems are temporary in nature, and may be resolved if and when the river rises to reach the new settlement areas. The research indicated a high degree of anxiety among resettlers about whether this would happen.²⁶

²⁶ Pankhurst & Piguet note that "the construction of dams can lead to a large migrant workforce during the construction, or as a result of opportunities created by irrigation schemes" (2009d, p 251). The issue is in play in this case, with the new workforce visible in the town of Mankush in Guba, and it has exacerbated local anxieties about riverine land – and livelihoods – being taken by outsiders.

A more fundamental issue may concern the stability of the height of the new reservoir, which can be expected to rise and fall seasonally, or according to a balance of water and power needs upstream and downstream. Given the flat topography in this area, fluctuations in the eventual volume of the reservoir can be expected to result in movement of the reservoir shoreline over a wide area; quite what impact this will have on local livelihoods remains to be seen and is difficult to predict.²⁷ The potential for the spread of invasive plant species into the new lake (as with Lake Tana upstream) is also already a cause of local concern, as are doubts about whether the water level really will rise, as the government claims (see below).

3.5 Community cohesion and articulation

A further issue of concern has been the relocation of communities who are not used to living together into close proximity. This is a problem raised in the literature on other resettlement sites (cf Pankhurst & Piguet, 2009a). As a BSG NRS official noted:

because people are being moved from different areas into sites/centres close to each other, we are also having to do quite a bit of work to ensure that the settlers coming from different *kebeles* get on OK and have good relations with each other once they are resettled. (FS&EP official, BoA, interviewed in Assosa, November 2018)

This is of particular concern given the complex and poorly understood context of Gumuz land rights and patterns of social interaction.²⁸ Berihun Mebratie documents a complex picture of social organisation based on clan and territory (2004, p 70). This contrasts with the common external stereotype rooted in “negative biases concerning shifting cultivation” (Berihun, 2014, p 119) often regarded in governmental reports as “responsible for the backwardness of the community” (Dergue-era report cited in Dessalegn, 1988, p 122).

Clan relations are more visible and important at village level than wider territorial groupings ... because clan locations and residences are not confined to single territories. (Berihun, 2004, p 81)

The number of clans among the Gumuz is much higher than the number of *kebeles* or villages, or formal political units in an area,²⁹ and “the concept of peasant association is not an indigenous form of organisation” (Berihun, 2004, pp 82–83). The correlation between clans and territorial control has also been extremely complex traditionally.

First and foremost, there are no clear territories of clan owned forests, and woodland and hunting and gathering grounds as such ... clans as territorial groups ... is a common misconception ... One may get the impression ... that a clan has the means and structural adequacy to distribute land among its members and oversee the land usage on an individual and current basis ... as an important decision-making body ... This is not, however, the case. Clans do not own land as such, rather it is individuals who own and use it ... Individuals are highly dependent on their lineage members for their social cultural and economic activities and security. Thus individual land holdings are

²⁷ Our research suggests that the diverse aspects of the local impact (social, cultural, environmental and economic) of the height of the reservoir and its stability and management constitute important developmental reasons why the Ethiopian government should be cautious in the international commitments it makes – both over initial filling of the reservoir and regarding future drought management.

²⁸ As noted above, this would bear closer investigation and analysis to understand existing norms.

²⁹ Berihun estimated around 50 clans. Wallmark (1981, p 79) put the number as high as 400.

transferable to other close relatives ... An individual is obliged to support and share his holdings with others who depend on their patrilineal lineage ... the decision over the land remains to lineage members not to the clan. (Berihun, 2004, pp 129–131)

This assessment brings into question the rationale and methods for the allocation of 'replacement land' under the resettlement programme, which is based on modern *kebele* units rather than traditional social structures. The potential 'invisible' disruption of important social relations among the Gumuz, following the flooding of the reservoir, is an issue which would require more detailed research.³⁰

3.6 Stakeholder coordination: sequencing, planning and credibility

One of the problems which have bedevilled the resettlement programme has been that of timing, sequencing and confusing communication. As a number of government interlocutors commented, they felt under pressure to ensure that populations moved as quickly as possible, once the programme began in 2005–06EC (2012–14). And yet, six-seven years later at the time of research, there had been little evidence of change to the flow or level of the river, and even any small rise in the level of the river, which had temporarily concentrated minds, had not been sustained: it was clear that many of the community members interviewed had grave doubts as to whether the river would really rise to engulf their communities, as they had been told it would.

So far it didn't rise "*yet alle wehamimolla ezi?*" [where is this water that is going to fill up [the river] here?]. We have been discussing it a lot among ourselves. They said it was going to rise, but to be honest we were confused. We don't know if it will rise, or if it will not rise, but we know that our livelihoods and lives are here, and the government must know what will happen. (Yarenger kebele elders FG, January 2019)

As one exasperated *wereda* official in Wembera put it:

It is difficult to explain to the population in that area what it means that the river will rise, and that they have to be relocated to an area which is higher than 645 metres above sea level. Many of them think they are outside the boundary, but they are not, because they don't really understand very well. (Feedback discussion with key informants in Wembera, Debre Zeit, January 2019)

Regional interlocutors agreed:

It is very hard for people to understand that the water really could rise up in the way in which we are telling them. However now,³¹ even that community at Yarenger who didn't want to move are starting to say "aha! Maybe the government was right and they were talking seriously about a rise in the water". So now some of the 745 households at Yarenger have finally started to move. But if we just give them training and orientation,

³⁰ This is an issue of wider concern as development-induced displacement escalates in many parts of Ethiopia, and has been explored in other areas, for instance in the Ethiopia WIDE longitudinal research programme (www.ethiopiawide.net). The specificity of attitudes and norms regarding land rights and tenure among Gumuz lineages calls for specific investigation and analysis in the context of the GERD reservoir, in order to comprehend its full social and economic impact. Interaction and cooperation between lineages on opposite banks of the river, for instance, will be abruptly altered.

³¹ That year (summer 2018), as a result of the way in which the construction was being pursued, and the channel of the water diverted in some way in order to allow for construction, there had been a small rise in the level of the river.

and even we ourselves don't really know what it means in practice, it is difficult to tell the population something meaningful. We really need the experience of other countries in order for this to be successful. (BSG NRS BoA, interviewed in Assosa, November 2018)

The cutting of palm trees at Yarenger has been another source of controversy, and one which raises questions of resource use and sequencing. Repeated cutting has now been conducted on several occasions, with an immediate impact on the environment, and little apparent reason, given delays in the dam construction process.

Even the process of cutting of trees has been extremely slow, and we didn't actually carry it out properly in my view. (BSG NRS BoA interviewed in Assosa, November 2018)

Wereda officials in Guba agreed that it had been poorly managed:

Another issue of controversy has been the programme of cutting trees. When they cut the trees it brought a huge increase in the temperature in those areas. It was really difficult, and controversial. People were still living there and they complained a lot. We don't want to cut trees, but we were told that we had to because if they floated into the lake they could create a problem for the dam. Our attitude was that we wanted to get right on into the new development, because we thought it would be good for our people. But for a long time we didn't see anything. From what we see now it would have been better to have done it more slowly, and waited until the water was going to rise. (Interview, Mankush, January 2019)

Over and above the sequencing issues which it raises, the cutting of trees up to a certain altitude has provided an interesting new marker of the likely location of the GERD reservoir for some members of the community. The new 'visibility' of the area which the authorities seem to expect will be submerged by the inundation now raises new questions in the minds of resettling communities: are we actually going to be next to the new lake in our new sites, or have we been moved to locations which will end up further from the lake once it rises? These questions have become more pressing, because the cutting of trees below a certain altitude has served as a tangible proxy for where communities believe the government plans to 'bring the lake'. Some of those interviewed felt that they have now discovered that their new sites are far from the boundary of the area identified for tree cutting, and that they will be disconnected from the lake, not just temporarily but even when the waters have risen. This has fed suspicion and insecurities about the future.

Another problem of sequencing and poor planning has been in the seasonal timing of some of the resettlement implementation. Regional officials are aware of the need to focus population movements between the harvesting and planting cycle. However, there have been a number of local instances of food insecurity because of the timing and planning of resettlement.³² Regional interlocutors were aware of the sensitivity of this kind of problem.

There are issues of conflict in some of these areas, but also the resettlement programme is very sensitive in terms of perceptions about human rights issues, and we need to get this right. (Interview with BSG NRS leader, Assosa, November 2018)

³² Regional programme implementation documentation noted for instance that "about 327 Farmers, who were resettled from Tsedal area due to the renaissance dam project, were exposed for food insecurity because they could not get land plots for farming for three years".

But they also see the long-term benefits:

On the other hand, there are positive aspects: we are playing host to an internationally important development initiative in BSG, and the creation of this huge lake will create many opportunities ... fishing industry development prospects ... transport opportunities. We expect that there will be prospects for development of the tourism industry, although as yet this has not been studied. (Interview with BSG NRS leader, Assosa, November 2018)

Research indicated that the Benishangul Gumuz regional government had to date been little involved in any national planning which may have taken place for wider developments associated with the GERD. One of the issues influencing the way the resettlement programme has worked is that planning and budgets have been largely under the control of the Federal GERD Project Office associated with the EEP/'EELPA' investment authority, whereas regional and local actors have been responsible for implementation of plans, but without budgetary or overall planning control. The knowledge base within the regional state is relatively sketchy, and the fact that the state does not have an overall land-use plan exacerbates the problems of regional planning. The location of the Abbay Basin Authority in Bahr Dar (with only a branch office in Assosa) arguably further compounds these difficulties.

So far, as far as we know there is no integrated plan and no resources budgeted for thinking about and capitalising on the longer-term social and economic impact of the GERD. Maybe it exists, but as a regional government we haven't been involved in developing anything, and we don't know about it. We know that there are many things which could be looked into in detail – tourism, livelihoods, modernisation – but the local people have to be prepared and properly equipped to be able to appreciate and participate in and even benefit from the changes. Otherwise it will be a mess. Last year [2017], the people even put their concerns directly to the Deputy PM – that they wanted water, electricity, schools, health posts, roads, telecoms, etc. But there was no change as a result. We have been able to allocate some additional money for extra water points, and for road construction. But these are small drops in the ocean compared with what is needed. (BSG NRS leader, interviewed in Assosa, November 2018)

We can't say that we have yet been able to resolve the issue of overall planning for the future ... We have done our best. For instance, in Awelebegn kebele in 2007EC, we stayed in the community for 26 days begging them to move. Oda [that area] is not easy, and they are not very easily convinced. The same in Fajuni kebele. There is also a problem with their irrigation. Also in Jemareh and Yarenger kebeles there are some people who haven't yet moved, and we haven't yet resolved the problems. (Interview, BSG NRS BoA, Assosa, November 2019)

Regional state and local stakeholders have a sketchy idea of what the GERD and its reservoir may bring to their region and people, and admitted that to date they had little sense of how they should be planning for the future. There is much scope and appetite here for sharing of international best practices, as well as lesson learning from other sites in Ethiopia.

we are aware that in Guba wereda in Metekel there will be a big influx of newcomers once the lake is finished, and we don't know how we will manage this process. We expect that there will be tourists, fish production, boats on the lake, investors, industries ... This will have a huge impact where there are many communities that will be affected. One can say that 19 kebeles in Sherkole, all of them in Guba, and half in Menge and

Oda will be affected. Also in Tsedal one can say that all the *kebeles* are close to the river. (Interview, BSG NRS BoA, Assosa, November 2018)

There remain many uncertainties about the GERD reservoir, but local expectations are high.

4 Conclusions

Our research has confirmed that by 2019 the implementation of the GERD resettlement programme was well advanced, with significant investment in compensation and the construction of physical infrastructure – buildings and some facilities. We encountered uncertainty and frustration on the part of a range of different interlocutors, at regional, *wereda* and *kebele* government levels, and among the affected Gumuz communities, regarding the protection of access to resources, services, property and livelihoods. Problems of planning, consistency, communication and management among stakeholders had fostered suspicion and anxiety, with a portion of the resettling community in several sites ‘voting with their feet’ and either refusing to relocate, or returning home.

The overriding problem the programme confronts is the provision of sustainable sources of drinking water, an issue which requires rethinking, new commitment and extra, perhaps major, investment from the federal government. Other issues could arguably be eased or resolved with improved planning, more effective learning from past experiences in Ethiopia, and some capacitation around international best practice. An important component of this involves the capability of the BSG NRS government to play the role of full partner in the development of socioeconomic plans for the benefit of the regional state’s people. Without the strong commitment and well capacitated engagement of the government in Assosa and Gilgel Beles, it is hard to be confident that the Gumuz who are being displaced by the GERD and its reservoir will share in the benefits it may bring.

The discussion of resettlement in the Wembera and Guba sites presented here bears striking similarities to the documented experiences of other hydropower DIDR sites in Ethiopia. Issues of access to services, property rights (including for young people), livelihoods and environmental changes, gender balance and community articulation are common throughout the literature. We have documented the ways in which local people have had only limited participation in designing what has been a top-down process, with little involvement in the selection of sites, timing of movements, or construction of facilities. This has limited their engagement, undermined their confidence in the process and, in some instances, meant that their local knowledge – of sustainable water sources and environmentally suitable building techniques – has not been harnessed. Better analysis of existing local norms relating particularly (but not only) to gender and land rights among the Gumuz could help ensure that outcomes promote social welfare, cultural respect and economic inclusion. As we have also discussed, this is a population which has faced a long history of violence and discrimination from neighbours and the Ethiopian state. The GERD reservoir now threatens to undermine their historical strategy of retreating to the riverine lowlands when threatened; newcomers, or fluctuations in the level of the lake, may even compromise their access to the river itself. These are serious concerns, which Ethiopia’s leaders could and should address.

Another cross-cutting problem, of poor stakeholder coordination between government bodies, and a technocratic, top-down and inflexible approach to planning, is also a globally widespread one. It is particularly complex here, given the involvement of multi-level federal, regional state and local actors. Much has been invested in the GERD resettlement programme but, as often elsewhere, implementation under challenging and remote circumstances has tended to be formulaic, with decisions taken at a distance further limiting room for community control and influence. This has increased the problems facing effective communication and inclusive decision making. As Skinner and Haas (2014b, p 2) have noted:

Large dams bring very specific social and environmental impacts that require tailored, targeted and context-specific responses. Population displacement, reduction/alteration of downstream flows, or creation of a significant barrier all pose unique challenges in a river system that are often not specifically provided for in national environmental or water legislation.

At the time of research, while GERD Project Funds for infrastructure had largely been spent, the allocation of funding to support livelihoods remained to be agreed. This represents a potential opportunity for more collaborative and inclusive programming, and the incorporation of lessons from international practice. A key tenet of the literature is that livelihoods support should be conceptualised as a long-term commitment over generations and decades, and ideally diversified to meet the needs of different groups and individuals (Hay et al, 2019). Here, however, livelihoods support has so far been seen only in the short-term as a one-off investment, whereas Ethiopian authorities should ideally give consideration to sustained resource allocation and/or 'benefit sharing' with local communities. In another important policy brief for the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), Skinner (2015, p 1) argues that, over and above short-term compensation, the sustained routing of a share of hydropower revenues for local development is essential for sustainable, inclusive and equitable development:

Even if [people displaced or affected by hydropower dams] are compensated for their initial livelihood or cultural losses, hardship and bitterness in relocated communities may last the lifetime of the dam, spanning multiple decades and generations.

The IIED's work demonstrates how such benefit-sharing schemes are working in different parts of the world (Skinner, 2015), even sometimes treating the land overtaken by reservoir flooding as a form of community 'equity' generating a permanent local community stake in the hydroelectric project and its profits (Hay et al, 2019). Skinner (2015, p 1) argues that the main challenge that revenue-sharing schemes face is governance: "ensuring that revenue redistribution is clearly and directly linked to the costs of dams in affected communities". He further recommends that revenue-sharing arrangements are clearly set out in legislation and regulations, with clear local negotiation of local benefits.

Sharing monetary benefits can take many forms (for example, equity sharing, special taxes, royalties, or preferential tariffs for local communities affected by hydropower projects), though revenue sharing is perhaps the most common and practical form. (Skinner, 2015, p 2)

This paper opened with an account of Ethiopia's long quest to establish hydropower facilities on the Blue Nile. In the face of international opposition, the country eventually found financial

support for two basin projects at Tekezze and Tana Beles (Milas, 2013, p 154); with Chinese and local resources the country has made significant progress with the GERD.

For the eastern Nile basin countries, rural futures may be severely limited by constraints of land and water in the context of rapid population increase ... Ethiopia, the principal source of the Nile waters, has thus far made little use of them. That is going to change because Ethiopia has no choice ... The development of Ethiopia's south-eastern river basins could contribute significantly to development and poverty reduction within and beyond its borders. (Milas, pp 177, 194)

These are nationally and geopolitically highly significant development steps, and it is important that they benefit – and are seen to benefit – those most closely concerned in an inclusive and equitable manner. As one local official noted, towards the end of our fieldwork in January 2019:

the problems which we have encountered with the settlement process are real and frustrating: it could give the '*hedassie gidib*' [renaissance dam] a bad image if it continues in this way. We are really afraid for the people whom we are resettling. I am from that area. I was born there. Nowadays, I don't even dare to go back there because they will be so angry with me, because there has been no development and they will hold us responsible.

There is no shortage of commitment to bring positive change locally, but as this paper has discussed, harnessing it has proved more challenging. Ethiopia has extensive experience with population resettlement, from which it can draw lessons, both positive and negative, potentially integrating these with learning from global DIDR. This won't happen without leadership, resources and dedicated institutional capacity. As a recent review concluded:

Contemporary recommendations for better resettlement policies are strikingly similar to those made decades ago, raising questions about learning from experience, whether research is influencing practice, and the attitudes and approaches of ... decision makers. (Hay et al, 2019, p 4)

The challenge is to find a "creative way of accommodating complexity within the requirements of effective policy" and "to start from open-endedness and flexibility, rather than from the boundedness of framework and procedure" (De Wet, 2009, p 46). Existing literature advocates a participatory approach to project planning and implementation, a wide range of resettlement and compensation options, and a flexible learning-oriented approach:

Trying to find ways of developing criteria and procedures that allow us to keep open people's choices and to cater for complexity in the process, for as long as possible, seems a good place to start. (de Wet, 2009, p 48)

Acronyms

BoA	[regional] Bureau of Agriculture
BoWIE	[regional] Bureau of Water Irrigation and Energy
BSG	Benishangul Gumuz
CBE	Commercial Bank of Ethiopia
DIDR	Dam-induced displacement and resettlement
EC	Ethiopian (Gregorian) Calendar (7–8 years behind Julian calendar)
EELPA	[former] Ethiopian Electric Light and Power Authority
EEP	Ethiopian Electric Power
EEU	Ethiopian Electricity Utility
ENA	Ethiopian News Agency
EPRDF	[then-ruling] Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
ETB	Ethiopian Birr (approximately 28 to the US dollar in January 2019)
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (<i>de facto</i> from 1991, <i>de iure</i> 1995)
FG	focus group
FS&EP	Food Security and Emergency Preparedness [BSG regional office under BoA]
GERD	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
GTP	Growth and Transformation Plan I (2010–15) and II (2015–20)
METEC	Metals and Engineering Corporation [under the FDRE Ministry of Defence]
MoWIE	FDRE Ministry of Water Irrigation and Energy
NRS	National Regional State [federated units under the FDRE constitution]
ODI	Overseas Development Institute, London
PDRE	People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1987–91)
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front [EPRDF member]
<i>Got</i>	smallest (informal) level of administration, ‘parish’
<i>Kebele</i>	lowest level of government administration
<i>Wereda</i>	district, lowest constitutionally recognised level of government administration

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