The Deprivation and Livelihood Impoverishment of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in East Wollega: the Case of Oromo Displacees from Kamashi Zone of Benishangul-Gumuz Region[1]

Zelalem Teferra [2]

Abstract

Internally displaced persons are among the most vulnerable people in Ethiopia, deprived of many things, some of which are fundamental to their lives, including homes, productive assets and livelihoods, familiar environments to which skills and practices have been attuned, community networks, and a sense of local belonging, to mention but a few. Ethiopia experiences internal displacements driven by multiple factors, the scale of which has risen to an unprecedented level in recent years. Of all the drivers of displacement, the post-2018 political quagmire induced the surge of inter-communal violence. Largely stemming from emergent inter-ethnic rivalry for power and resources at the periphery and propelled by political tensions at the center, communal violence displaced over 3 million people in 2018 and 2019. Displacement of such magnitude engendered untold human suffering and stretched to the brink of resources and the capacity of the government to manage them. This study is centered on the exploration of one of the conflict-induced displacements in Western Ethiopia, with particular reference to the plight of tens of thousands of Oromo displacees from the Kamashi Zone of the Benishangul-Gumuz Region in the wake of the 2018 political transition. A qualitative research approach was employed to generate the necessary information. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and case narratives were the major data-gathering tools. These were corroborated by an extensive and critical review of relevant literature. The study revealed that the recent conflict in the region is too delicate and multilayered. Situated in competition for power and resource, it was played out at the national, regional, and even

[2] Zelalem Teferra (PhD) is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University. He can be reached at: zelalemgeta2012@gmail.com

village level by multiple actors. Historically embedded narratives of injustices (imagined or real), constitutionally sanctioned inequalities, competing political and resource interests as well as a proxy war waged between the incumbent government and the deposed hegemonic party -Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) that dominated Ethiopia's political landscape nearly for three decades nourished and inflamed the conflict. The study also found that the regional constitution of the Benishangul Gumuz disproportionately privileges the so-called indigenous groups in the region (the Gumuz, Berta, Shinasha, Mao, and Komo) while excluding others from political power and economic benefits placed a huge stain on inter-ethnic relations. The claim of exclusive rights to power and resources by the Gumuz in the Kamashi Zone and their attempt to clean the zone from what they call aliens – settlers, to contain further migration and settlement as well as the urge to assert sovereignty over the region; have triggered conflict with the Oromo who despite their numerical significance were denied equal rights. This was further exacerbated by chaotic power shakeup following the 2018 political transition whereby purged and disgruntled former political cadres emerged as a potentially destabilizing force by pitting one ethnic group against another.

1. Introduction

The history of population displacement in Ethiopia runs deep. Plethora of natural and man-made calamities combined or separately induced human displacement in the country. Slow-onset natural adversities such as drought and famine took their toll both on human life and properties over the ages (see Pankhurst R., 1985; Keller, 1992; Webb, P. *et al,* 1992). The sudden-onset disasters such as flood and landslide, albeit in limited scale in the past, have become more frequent in recent years displacing tens of thousands in 2020 alone (mainly along the major river valleys of Awash and Omo). Conflict and development induced displacements are also well-entrenched in the history of this country (Pankhurst A. & Piguet F. 2004 and 2009).

The successive governments of Ethiopia have tried to curb the vagaries of such adversities through organized resettlement programs and fairly succeeded despite serious violation of human rights. Recent displacements induced by urban expansion and remedies sought by the government, however, proved contentious and lethal enticing popular opposition and mass protest.

Particularly polemical and resentful was the two-pronged urban transformation strategy adopted by the City Government of Addis Ababa since 2014. The implementation of this strategy in the form of inner city redevelopment (renewal) and outward expansion without adequate public consultation and commensurate compensation displaced many poor households from old urban center, and Oromo peasants on the outskirts of Addis Ababa (Zelalem, 2017b:109-113).

Coupled with the ill-fated Addis Ababa and the surrounding Oromia Region Integrated Urban Development Plan[3] (see Aberra, 2019) the City Government's deaf ear to the plight of displaced peasant households seriously angered the Oromo youth and the intelligentsia, who responded by staging a series of protests spearheaded by the Oromo youth called *Qeerroo*[4]. Conceived and hatched outside the state policy framework, the new protest movement reanimated deep seated opposition against Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), a former insurgent group that emerged as a hegemonic political party and dominated Ethiopia's post–*Derg* political architecture.

Following the popular protest, uneasy political transition was brokered whereby Abiy Ahmed Ali emerged as the Prime Minister of Ethiopia and Chairman of the ruling coalition, Ethiopian *People's Revolutionary Democratic Front* (EPRDF). Initially, the ascendency of the new P.M.to the helm of power from the largest ethnic group (Oromo) in the country ushered the hope that Ethiopia would truly become a plural polity capable of embracing all forms of cultural diversity: ethnic, linguistic, and religious.

Subsequent opening up of long suffocated political space, democratization efforts and rhetoric of national unity encapsulated in Prime Minister Abiy's *Medemer* (synergy/coming together) philosophy, albeit widely cherished across all social spectrums, yet opened up the Pandora-box of Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism out of which leapt aggravated mutual suspicion, tense political competition, power struggle and communal tension. Most particularly, the equivocal meaning assigned to PM''s *Medemer* philosophy

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[3] Designed to guide infrastructure development from 2006-2030, E.C., the so called Integrated Addis Ababa and Surrounding Oromia Towns Master Plan has become a bone of contention between Oromo youth and the federal government. Suspected of land grab and ethnic cleansing, it triggered a widespread uprising, which served as a big push for change of leadership in the ruling coalition (EPRDF government) in 2018.

[4] The term 'Qeroo' denotes 'youth' in Oromo vernacular language. For the detail about a popular movement unleashed by this group, please see Mosisa Aga, 2020.

propelled centripetal and centrifugal tendencies with regard to post-EPRDF political architecture as both camps exploited it for their own advantages.

Proponents of ethnic federalism intentionally distorted the meaning of *Medemer* ascribing it negative connotation. They argued that it is a sugar-coated poison aimed at dismantling ethnic federalism and resurrecting the defunct unitary state. They directly accused the PM of encroaching on their constitutional right to self-rule. Others took it as a unifying ideology to revive pan-Ethiopian sentiment.

Spearheaded by ethnic elites and enthused by the unemployed youth, the cleavages between the two camps played out at both the center and the periphery. In due course, moving beyond semantics, the situation slipped into unprecedented chaos triggering new form of inter - communal conflict whose violent expression displaced millions of people in a very short period of time (see IDMC[5] reports for Ethiopia, 2018 and 2019). The conflict spread almost across all regions of the country turning the entire nation inflicting massive displacement.

This study is conducted against the backdrop of such events with the objective of critically examining the causes and impacts of the ominous inter-ethnic conflict which erupted between the Oromo and the Gumuz communities in western Ethiopia in the wake of the 2018 political transition. It is organized as follows: section one introduces the study and its objectives followed by description of methods used to generate the necessary data. Conceptual framework and review of related literature are presented in section three. Section four and five are dedicated to overview of Oromo-Gumuz relations with a focus on post-2018 conflict and displacement. Issues related to the magnitude and intensity of conflict-induced displacement was thoroughly discussed in section six. This was followed by summary and conclusion.

2. Methods of the Study

This study employed qualitative research approach. The bulk of data and information for the study was generated through in-depth interview whereby purposively selected respondents provided relevant information on the causes, processes and impacts of the displacement. The respondents were composed

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[5] IDCM (the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center) is a leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement worldwide. It is part of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), an independent, non-governmental humanitarian organization.

of diverse age and gender categories. However, they shared occupational similarity as all of them were peasants. Overall 40 individuals were interviewed in the course of the two separate field works conducted in February and April 2019. Interview questions were prepared before the commencement of the field work and pilot tested to see their effectiveness.

The other data gathering methods employed in this study were Focus Group Discussion (FGD), case narration, and physical observation. Two separate FGDs were conducted with a total of six study participants in each FGD. The discussants were drawn from different backgrounds: age, gender and social status. Case narration of four peasant households was also recorded. Of them, two illustrative narrations were included in this work.

The physical observation helped to assess the living condition of IDPs in Nekemte town, who live in rental houses and have a better understanding of the impacts of displacement and the responses sought. This is because by February 2019 (when the field work commenced), IDP camps were already closed down by the government anticipating the return of all IDPs to their original places of domicile, i.e., Kamashi Zone, Belojeganfoye and Yaso *Woredas*. However, majority of the IDPs were not willing to return back because of security reasons. They stayed in Nekemte renting private houses on the outskirts of the town.

The field data was corroborated by extensive review of general and related literature both published and unpublished, mainly focusing on academic journals, thesis works, Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), government and aid organization reports as well as IOM documents.

3. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

In this section, a review of theoretical and empirical literatures was made to highlight major concepts, theoretical perspectives and current state of knowledge about the study population.

3.1. Conceptualizing Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Forced displacement has been accompanied with natural disasters, persecution and wars throughout human history, but has only become a topic of serious study and discussion relatively recently. The term Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) too received currency in recent decades in spite of the antiquity of the situations giving rise to it. Some scholars or writers attribute the use of such term to the period of the Cold War when receiving nationals from

opposition blocs who were fleeing political persecution was widely practiced (Phuong, 2004). Yet, it was only in the 1980s, especially with the mass movement of the Iraqi Kurds and similar events in Africa and Latin America, that the formal mentioning of to the term began (Phuong, 2004; Admasu, 2010).

According to Phuong (2004), the first official reference to the word internally displaced persons was coined at the UN General Assembly resolution concerning refugees and displaced persons in the Sudan in 1972. However, by then, no efforts were made to clarify what this concept meant and when it happened. [6] The global attention to the concerns of these groups of people within their territorial borders gathered momentum at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. Formal discussions on the protective imperatives and other needs of IDPs were carried out mainly under the auspices of the UN beginning from the 1990s (Cohen and Deng, 1998a).

In March 1991, the UN Commission on Human Rights requested the UN Secretary-General to prepare a report on IDPs (Admasu, 2010).   This important report prompted a much more active involvement of the UN on the issue. It also resulted in the appointment of a Special Representative on IDPs, Mr. Francis M. Deng, whose primary mandate was to analyze the normative framework of the protection of IDPs. This ultimately led to the formulation and adoption of the 'Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement' which is one of the important documents on matters of IDPS at UN level.[7] An option for making a binding treaty at the UN level was said to be avoided due to the sensitivity of the matter to most member states and the accompanying slow process in traditional treaty-making and ratification processes which may take decades to come into force (ibid).

Owing to the above constraints, the definition of the internally displaced persons remained a disputed semantic exercise for some time (see Cohen R.

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[6] It was only with the organization of two international conferences on the issue in the late 1980s, namely, the 1988 Oslo International Conference on the Plight of Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons in Southern Africa (SARRED), and the International Conference on Central American Refugees in May 1989 that awareness about internal displacement has been significantly enhanced (Phuong 2004: 8).

[7] The second aspect of the mandate was to review the existing institutional framework and seek means of improving coordination between various UN agencies. The third and the final aspect of his mandate consisted of on-site visits.

and Deng, F. 1998a). For instance, the 1992 UN working definition was deemed too narrow due to excessive focus on those who were 'forced to flee,' by excluding those who were expelled from their homes because of ethnic and religious ties (Cohen, R. and Deng, F., 1998b).

Dispute also surrounded the use of a wider IDP terminology and the extent, to which different forms of displacement (e.g. development-induced displacement, poverty-induced migration etc.) are incorporated, along with arguments of when displacement ends (Weiss, T. G., and Korn, D. A, (2006). Nevertheless, Cohen and Deng (1998a) suggested that there are two distinctive features which pertain to IDPs: i) movement is coerced or is involuntary and ii) the populations affected remain within their national borders. The difference between refugees and IDPs is an important distinction – the former crosses an international border (refugees) whereas the latter does not (Hickel, M.C. 2001). All these may reflect the critical overlap of the concept of internal displacement and associated difficulties for proper conceptualization. Notwithstanding the disputes, the definition adopted by the UN 1998 Guiding Principles will be used in this study as working definition. Accordingly:

> Internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid armed conflict, situations of generalized conflict, violations of human rights or natural or manmade disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border (UNOCHA, 2004:1).

In addition to the above comprehensive definition, Article 1(5) of the Great Lakes Protocol on the Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons puts emphasis on the situation of persons displaced due to development interventions. Accordingly,

> Internally Displaced Persons also means persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of large scale development projects, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.

In spite of similarities in displacement, IDPs and refugees differ in terms of destination and legal protection. Refugees are persons who, unlike IDPs, have crossed international borders and lost the protection of their home countries.

Protection for such persons is provided by existing international mechanisms. IDPs, having remained in their home countries, are entitled to the protection of their home-country governments even when those governments are causes of their displacement.[8]

Moreover, the "internally displaced person" concept does not convey a particular legal status, as that of 'refugee'. The term is merely descriptive of the individual's factual circumstances. It applies to any person who is forced to leave home, regardless of cause, but remains under the jurisdiction of his /her state. It therefore applies to: internally displaced *citizens* of the country; as well as internally displaced *non-citizens,* or stateless individuals, who habitually reside in the country ("habitual residents").

As summarized by Phuong (2004), internal displacement typically results from the following causes: (a) *Armed conflict***,** as defined by international humanitarian law, when people are attacked or are likely to be attacked. Such conflicts may arise between states or between state and non-state actors or between non-state actors; (b) G*eneralized violence***,** whose intensity or level may not rise to that associated with armed conflict according to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their additional Protocols I and II; (c) *Natural and man-made disasters***,** including both rapid and, under certain circumstances, slow-onset disasters, such as those provoked by the effects of climate change; (d) *Human rights violations,* deliberately targeting specific populations, which may flee in hope of safety and respite; (e) *Displacement caused by development or environmental protection activities,* where major infrastructure or other projects may require local residents to move. In general, displacement occurs where coercion is employed, choices are restricted, and the affected people are facing more risks than opportunities by staying in their places of residence. These features distinguish internal displacement from "voluntary" or "economic" migration. As will be discussed shortly, some of such distinctive features of IDPs have also revealed themselves in the current study area in western Ethiopia.

3.2. Perspectives on Conflict –Induced Displacement

Forced internal displacement, whether a result of development or conflict, is one of the great scourges of the contemporary era for it tears apart regions,

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[8] It should be born in mind that there are instances when states are unable or unwilling to assist and protect those displaced within their borders and call on international support.

communities and households (Muggah, H.C.R. 2000). Owing to its widespread occurrence, there exist wide-ranging empirical studies explaining causes and impacts of forced displacement. Disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and demography have been active in conceptualizing forced displacement. Theoretical models and perspectives have been put forward, especially by anthropologists and sociologists to explain, the process, risks, impacts and reconstruction of displaced persons' livelihoods as a central requirement for equitable resettlement programs (see Chambers' (1969) "*Three Stage* general model in the evolution of land settlement schemes in Africa*"; Scudder and Colson's (1*982*) four stages of settlement process; de Wett's (1988) "Inherent Complexity Model"; and Cernea's "Impoverishment Risk and Reconstruction (IRRR) Model ."* However,* compared to the resettlement of development-induced displacees, durable solutions to the plight of conflict- induced internally displaced persons are less supported by theoretical perspectives.

For instance, until recently, being thought the domain of humanitarian sphere, the problem of IDPs occupied marginal position in economics (Verme, Paolo 2017). Moreover, as studies on IDPs largely focus on assistance, protection programs, or service delivery mostly from a humanitarian perspective and in the form of reports rather than academic articles, theories of conflict- induced displacement are hard to come by and published articles in top economics journals are very rare (ibid). Without prejudices to the Kampala Convention (African Union Convention for the protection and assistance of IDPs) and despite their non-binding nature, perhaps, the UN "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement," remain the most comprehensive international legal instruments advocating for the protection of the rights of IDPs (see UN OCHA, 2004).

Besides these instruments, the current research is informed by a combination of perspectives. Augmented by IDMC's 2018 study on displacement ripple effect, it draws on multiple deprivation theory and Michael M. Cernea's Impoverishment Risk and Reconstruction (IRR) Model whose contents are succinctly discussed hereunder.

A) Multiple Deprivations and Ripple Effect of Displacement

The dictionary meaning of deprivation refers to a situation in which one does not have things or conditions that are generally considered necessary for a pleasant livelihood. It is the consequence of a lack of income and other

resources that collectively can be seen as living in poverty (Tuhin K. *et al.*, 2016). Deprivation can be absolute or relative. Individual absolute deprivation refers to the lack of capacity to afford one's basic physical needs such as food, whereas relative deprivation refers to a social phenomenon arising when individuals cannot afford what most others in their environment can (Sen, 1983).

Among the causes of deprivation, forced internal displacement is considered the cause as well as a consequence. Because IDPs, due to their forced displacement, are inherently vulnerable to deprivation of property, land and basic social services such as healthcare, and education. In the process of displacement, particularly rural residents are often forced to leave behind valuable properties on which their livelihood heavily depends. In many cases such properties are subsequently damaged or destroyed by fighting or appropriated by parties to a conflict or other persons, who themselves may be displaced (See OCHA, IDP Handbook, 2007: 255).[9]

Deprivation of property can also form part of a deliberate political or military strategy, in effect a weapon of war, aimed at terrorizing, punishing and displacing particular communities and altering the ethnic or religious character of a country, in whole or in part. Property can be lost not only during displacement, but also in the process of return (ibid).

A study conducted by the International Displacement Monitoring Center IDMC in 2018 has indicated that internal displacement exerts multidimensional economic and social impacts. It has a negative impact on the livelihoods, education, health, security, social life, environment and access to housing and infrastructure of displaced people, their hosts and the people they leave behind (see the table below).

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[9] Ascertaining the above assumption, loss of farm land and other properties such as livestock, crops and houses, which had been later appropriated by the belligerent group who displaced them, has been reported by Oromo displacees from Kamashi Zone of Benishangul Gumuz Regional State during my field work.

Table 1: Examples of how the impacts of internal displacement on each dimension can affect other dimensions (Source: IDCM Report, October 2018:7)

	Education	Environment	Health	Housing and infrastructure	Livelihoods	Security	Social life
Education			Children suffering from malnutrition may be less attentive in class	Crowded classrooms in host areas damage education quality	Families in financial Difficulties may send their children to work	IDPs may face discrimination In school and drop out	
Environment				Shelter construction can deplete forest in host areas	IDPs may need to over-exploit Natural resources to make a living		
Health	Disruption in education can affect the mental health of displaced children	Overcrowding in host areas may increase pollution and subsequent diseases		Poor housing Conditions can increase the transmission of communicable diseases	Reduced income can lead to inability to afford healthcare	Fear of abuse or discrimination can affect IDPs' mental health	The disruption in social networks can aggravate depression
Housing and infrastructure			IDPs with Disabilities may be unable to access shelter and services in camps		Loss of livelihood can lead IDPs to live in informal settlements		

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Livelihood	Limited schooling can undermine future access to well paid jobs	Over exploitation can reduce crop yield for hosts and IDPs	IDPs suffering from stress aggravated by displacement may be unable to work	IDPs living in camps may be unable to access job opportunities		Lack of documentation can prevent IDPs from working or accessing aid	Displacement may disrupt business networks and reduce income opportunities
Security	Limited education has been linked with increased levels of violence	Fights over natural resources have been reported between hosts and IDPs		Women living in camps or informal settlements may be at higher risk of sexual violence	Loss of livelihood Can force IDPs to Undertake dangerous income-generating activities		Tensions between communities can lead to violent incidents between IDPs and Hosts
Social life	Lack of access to education severely damages the social life of children	Tensions often arise between the Hosts and IDPs over sharing of natural resources	Mental disorders Aggravated by internal displacement can force people into Isolation	Gender separation in camps can divide families and communities	Unemployment due to internal displacement can increase isolation		

As could be seen from the above table, the effects of internal displacement on each dimension ripple through to others. For instance, health can be affected by loss of livelihoods, poor housing conditions and disrupted social life (IDMC Report, October 2018). Loss of livelihoods due to internal displacement in its turn can limit access to decent shelter, healthcare and education, jeopardize security and social life. Internal displacement's consequences on livelihoods and school systems can reduce access to education and security. Shelter is one of the highest burdens on displaced people, hosts and aid providers' financial resources, and affects security and health. Security can be damaged by internal displacement and subsequently threaten health, social life and livelihoods. The environmental impact of mass internal displacement is heavily dependent on housing, infrastructure and livelihoods solutions, with effects on security for both displaced people and host communities. The disruption of social life caused by displacement can damage mental health and access to work, and is connected to housing conditions.

Thus, as aptly pointed out by IDCM study, the impact of internal displacement must be assessed comprehensively for all of these dimensions. Policies looking to address or prevent internal displacement should consider the phenomenon in its entirety. In other words, since the impact of one dimension is inextricably woven with other dimensions, there is a need for holistic approach.

B) Impoverishment Risk and Reconstruction Model (IRR)

The Impoverishment Risk and Reconstruction (IRR) model was a theoretical framework developed to address involuntary resettlement. It highlights the intrinsic risks that cause impoverishment through displacement, as well as the ways to counteract/eliminate or mitigate these risks (See Cernea and McDowell, 2000). IRR model was initially devised by Michael Cernea in 1997 to assess and plan resettlement in the context of development- induced displacement (DID) (Muggah, 2000). The origin of this model is both empirical and theoretical. Empirically, it is derived from the extraordinary accumulation of factual findings during the last quarter of the twentieth century, reported by resettlement studies in many countries. Theoretically, it benefited from the new state-of-the-art achieved by resettlement research during the same period (Cernea and McDowell, 2000).

The model was premised on eight basic variables common to resettlement: landlessness; joblessness; homelessness; economic marginalization; increased morbidity; food insecurity; loss of access to common property; and social disintegration, which, when combined, lead to rapid impoverishment. The eight components of the reconstruction process: land-based re-establishment; re-employment; housing reconstruction; social integration; improved health-care; adequate nutrition and restoration of community assets; are designed to reverse the eight impoverishment risks (Muggah, 2000).

As the model was originally designed to capture only the impoverishment risks of DID without much concern for the impoverishment risks of Conflict-induced Displacement (CID), further refinements aimed at exploring the context of refugee settlement were made by Cernea and McDowell in 2000. On top of that, series of supplementary variables drawn from empirical research on limited access to education; declines in political participation; and the increased risk of political and criminal violence have been added by Muggah (2000) to address the impoverishment risk of conflict–induced displacement in Colombia. With the newly added four components of CID related risks and attendant reconstruction measures such as community reconstruction; access to educational opportunities; reformation of political activity and protection of physical and legal rights, it is assume that the IRR model fully addresses impoverishment risks and their reconstructions in both development-induced, and conflict-induced forced displacements.

However, since CID is largely spontaneous and emerges very rapidly leaving little or no opportunity to predict, plan, manage or mitigate the phenomenon, and as the IRR model was not fully tested in the context of Ethiopia, in this particular study, it was approached with a reasonable degree of caution. Moreover, as the model deals with impoverishment risks posed by resettling development induced displacees without due attention to the two equally important durable solutions to the plight of IDPs, i.e., return and integration, the current researcher used it only to explain the impoverishment risks faced by Oromo displacees from Kamashi Zone of BGRS in the wake of their displacement. Impoverishment risks emanating from resettlement and reintegration were not assessed as the displacees in my study area haven't been resettled anywhere or returned to their original places of domicile.

3.3. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Contemporary Ethiopia

Internal displacement is by no means a new phenomenon in Ethiopia. It is well-entrenched in the history of this country albeit with varying causes, magnitude and intensity. However, I will not indulge here into the exploration of its historical roots for two important reasons. First, the relatively recent coinage of the term *Internally Displaced Persons* (IDPs) as an academic concept, and its association with a national border makes the discussion from historical perspective difficult because internationally recognized state borders came into being only with the emergence of modern states. Secondly, with regards to Ethiopia, the absence of clearly defined and internationally recognized state border until the emergence of the modern Ethiopian state makes it a futile exercise to indulge into pre-twentieth century exploration of IDP situation, despite the ubiquity of displacement as a phenomenon. Thus, I will limit myself to exploration of recent developments.

As indicated above, despite the historically rootedness of the phenomenon, the last couple of decades witnessed a surge in the number of IDPs in Ethiopia. Apart from conventional drivers, inter-ethnic conflict stemming from various causes, but largely attributed to exclusive entitlement right to the newly carved ethno-national states of Ethiopia have pushed the so-called non-titular groups[10] out of their habitual places of residence albeit with varying intensity. The magnitude of such conflicts soured dramatically since 2016 displacing the highest number of people in the first half of 2018.[11] According to the 2019 UNHCR Humanitarian Requirement Plan, there were over 2.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ethiopia in 2017, compared with an estimated 326,649 in September 2016.

A report released by the National Disaster Risk Management Commission of Ethiopia on March 04, 2019, stated that more people were internally displaced in the year 2018 as compared with the previous three consecutive years. The escalation of violence along ethnic lines had exacerbated the situation of IDPs who were located in seven regions of the country except Afar and Gambella. Among them, the largest number of IDPs was hosted in Oromia Region while

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[10] All the Regional States of Ethiopia, which have been carved according to the 1995 Constitution, bear the name of a titular ethnic group, which is numerically dominant in the region with the exception of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' (SNNPR) Region and Gambella.
[11] These episodes of displacements have been taking place in a context of major shifts within the Ethiopian political system (for the detail, please see MSF report 2019).

the Somali Region hosted the second largest IDPs. Based on the three year IDP trend analysis (2016–2018) the major drivers of displacements were conflict followed by displacement due to climate induced factors.

According to the aforementioned report, 18% of the IDPs were displaced due to climate change induced factors (drought, flood, and landslides) while the remaining 82% due to conflict. The majority of IDPs took refuge among host communities, and some were moved to temporary shelters in collective sites. Conflict-induced IDPs of the year 2017 and 2018 could be categorized into two: those who are uprooted from the place of origin; and displaced and crossed one or more regions within the country and the ones who are displaced within the regions (Without crossing regional boundaries) moved from the periphery of the region to the center of *Woredas* /district/.

Ethnic clashes between the Gedeo and Oromos from west Guji in southern Ethiopia, and violence in the Oromia-Somali border region have displaced the largest population in 2018. What made the problem of IDPs in this particular locality more difficult was that the area was already one of the most densely populated parts of Ethiopia with the influx doubling the population size. IOM's 15th round Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) in Oromia Region (Feb 2019) suggested that conflict stands as the primary cause for displacement in the region. However, IDPs displaced before and during 2018 are reportedly displaced by both conflict and climate induced reasons. In addition to this, 25% of IDPs reported were displaced prior to the 2018 conflict. The majority of IDPs identified in the region were displaced to locations nearer to their areas of origin with 67% of being internally displaced within the region. Of the IDPs displaced within the region, 56% were displaced within their zone of origin (ibid).

This study focuses on IDPs that were displaced from Kamashi Zone of Benishangul Gumuz and took refuge in East Wollega of Oromia Regional State. As aptly indicated by a French NGO, Doctors without Borders (see MSF2019), inter-communal clashes in the Kamashi Zone of Benishangul Gumuz Region in the western Ethiopia resulted in the displacement of 250,000 people by the end of September 2018. These IDPS have, however, received the least attention both from the government and aid agencies. Largely preoccupied by alarming displacement situation along Oromia-Somali border and the Gedeo–Guji conflict, both government and aid agencies paid little attention to the plight of the IDPs in western Ethiopia. Nor did these IDPs

receive the necessary reaction from academic researchers.[12] It is this state of neglect that prompted the current study. However, as the causes of displacement are rooted in long-standing historical tensions that transcend current realities, the discussions made in this study too went beyond the limits of the recent conflicts to shed light on the underlying Gumuz-Oromo relationships.

4. Overview of Oromo - Gumuz Relations: Historical Roots and Current Realities

The western Ethiopian borderland that was considered as no man's land and slave bearing territory have long attracted the interest of Medieval Abyssinian Christian Kingdoms whose rulers have periodically and sporadically raided the region to fetch slaves (see Triulzi, 1981 and Abdussamad, 1999). However, they were reluctant to completely incorporate this region into their political realm considering it as inhospitable for its rampant malaria infestation. The Oromo instead, carved a new homeland out of a vast territory lying south of the Abbay (Blue Nile) River during the late 16th and early 17th century by subduing preexisting communities, mainly the Gumuz and Shinasha who put little or no resistance to them (See Tesema , 1980; Asnake, 2009; Woku, 2010; Zelalem, 2017a).

Thus, it is safe to say that the Oromos and Gumuz have a long-standing relationship that spans over three centuries. Yet, irrespective of how they managed to coexist (be it as patron or clients, masters or slaves, adoptive or adopted, or forbearing or tolerating each other), the first encounter between the two ethnic groups was not easy as is their current relationship.

The Gumuz, speakers of a Nilo-Saharan language family inhabiting sheer geographical area in western Ethiopia that includes the former Metekel sub-province of Gojjam and Wollega along the Didessa, Dabus and Angar river

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[12] Social science scholarship in Ethiopia has left the plight of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the background for a long time, focusing instead on migration and resettlement (See Pankhurst A. and Piquet, 2004, 2009; Fransen, S. and Kuschminder, K., 2009), and refugee problems (Bariagaber, 1997). As aptly observed by *Allhone Mulugeta (*2010) state sponsored moving or relocation of disaster stricken population towards safe areas in the form of resettlement far better captured the attention of anthropologists, instead of the plights, protection needs, and protection mechanisms available to IDPs in various international normative instruments including the Guiding Principles. The exception might be Mehari (2017), who extensively reflected on the plight of IDPs and their protection needs in his work.

valleys, had a very complex relationship with the Oromo, a Cushitic speaking people whose historic expansion of the late 16th and early 17th centuries to western Ethiopia brought them into direct contact with a myriad of small communities residing in the area. As we shall see in the impending sections, this relationship has become more delicate following the federalization of the Ethiopian State in 1995[13] whereby the Gumuz have become one of the titular ethnic groups in the newly carved Benishangul-Gumuz Region along with Berta, Shinasha, Mao and Komo (See also Young 1998 and Asnake , 2009).

In the course of westward expansion, the Oromos treated the aliens they captured differently: those who were designated as *Brown Enemy* such as the Omotic speaking Sinicho/Shinasha were fairly treated as compared to those with deep dark skin color such as the Gumuz and Mao. While the former were assimilated through *Boju* (captive) adoption and completely integrated, the latter were enslaved even if the mode of slavery was mild, predominantly being a domestic one (See Hultin, 1979; Zelalem, 2017).

This notwithstanding, the Gumuz escaped massive enslavement and wholesale cultural assimilation with the help of two coping strategies they adopted: a) their non-engagement/avoidance strategy which manifested itself in avoiding direct physical confrontation (warfare) and retreat into distant inhospitable lowland areas; b) avoidance of intermarriage with aliens. Endogamous marriage among the Gumuz mediated by *sister exchange*[14] excluded the possibility of aliens' entry into their kinship relations. These strategies seem to have kept the Gumuz safer from cultural and physical onslaughts through assimilation and warfare, albeit with loss of territory.

Things, however, begun to change first with the incorporation of the western borderlands along Ethio-Sudanese border (Assosa, and Gambella) into the sphere of influence of two rival Oromo kings: Jote Tulu and Bakre Godana of Leqa before the advance of the northern Christian Kingdom into the area. The incorporation of the whole region into the Ethiopian State by Emperor Menelik and the ultimate inclusion of the lowlands hitherto inhabited by the

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[13] The federalization of the Ethiopian state along ethnic lines institutionalized and at the same time bureaucratized ethnicity imposing the idea that a particular individual legally belongs to a given ethnic group. Under the new political dispensation, citizen of mixed origin were caged into involuntary association with a single ethnic identity even if they prefer dual or multi ethnic identification. This was enforced through provision of ethnic based identity cards (IDs).
[14] This is a kind of marriage where the groom's sister marries the sister of the bride resulting in exchange of sister in-laws.

Gumuz and the Berta into the former Wollega Governorate under the rule of *Dejazmach* Kumsa Moreda of Leqa Nekemte completely altered the *status quo*. On the one hand, it has drawn the two communities, namely, the Oromos and Gumuz, more closely to one another allowing good neighborly interactions (See Worku, 2010). On the other hand, it had imposed a legally sanctioned structural inequality whereby the Oromo lords (chiefs) were formally entitled to represent the central government and levy taxes from the Gumuz subjects. Finally, these changes brought to an end centuries of disengagement and avoidance. In due course, various forms of inter-cultural relations were forged including language exchange and inter-marriage albeit with limited extent (ibid). However, over-taxation of the Gumuz and subsequent grievances led to conflict between the Oromo and the Gumuz during the 1950s.[15]

A far closer interaction occurred during the *Derg* period with the opening up of the lowland areas along the Didessa and Angar Valleys for modern agricultural development. The establishment of Wollega State Farm in 1976 with its seven branches along the two river valleys that were predominantly inhabited by various Gumuz clans, and the subsequent flocking of the highlanders into the area, the majority of whom were Oromo, has dramatically changed the demographic equation.

Since then, the highlanders have begun to settle in the lowlands areas, not only as employees of the state farms and daily laborers, but also as government tax payers (Worku, 2010). In addition to the ever increasing downslope flow of the highlanders in search of arable land, the state sponsored resettlement of the 1980s, which brought into play people from drought prone areas of northern Ethiopia, most particularly from Wollo and Tigray made the situation fraught with tension. Yet, unitary state as it was by then; Ethiopia didn't allow any ethnic group an exclusive entitlement right to territories where it resides. There was no such practice as labeling any one as an intruder or alien with regard to settlement. Thus no conflict occurred on the basis of exclusive entitlement right to a given territory. Instead, in addition to cultural

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[15] A very good example is the rebellion of Abba Tone, Abba Qoro (local Gumuz chief) under Qumbi Qnno chief of Drro Oromo in 1953, which brought about armed clash between the Oromo suzerain and a Gumuz vassal, and subsequently put down with the intervention of forces from the central government (Tesema, 2009; Asnake, 2009 and Worku, 2010).

interactions, multidimensional economic interdependences begun to take shape between communities of diverse backgrounds: pre-Ormo communities as well as spontaneous and state sponsored settlers (see Zelalem, 2004).

The demise of the *Derg* regime in 1991 ushered in a new form of state structure: the end of a unitary state and adoption of federal arrangement brought about a radical shift in the relationship between Ethiopia's ethnic groups (Asnake, 2009). As was the case with some other regional states, the making of the boundaries of the Benishangul-Gumuz region with Oromia impelled inter-ethnic and inter-regional conflicts. Lack of a mutually recognized boundary and the prevalence of a mistrust between the political elites of the two regions affected relationships between the two regions. In the words of Asnake,

> …the formation of the Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State (BGNRS) has indeed transformed relationships between the Gumuz and their neighbors. One important aspect in these relationships is the process of making inter-regional boundaries, which is fraught with friction and tension. This is particularly important for the emerging relationship between the BGNRS and Oromia regions (Asnake (2009:223).

According to the same author, at the initial stage, the widespread mixed Oromo\Gumuz settlements in the border areas of the two regions did not only hinder the boundary-making exercise but also led to inter-ethnic conflicts over the control of vital local resources such as farming land, forests and administrative structures. This was further exacerbated by the continued migration of highland Oromo peasants to the fertile lowlands of BGRS [16] who allegedly refused to pay taxes to Benishangul Gumuz Region while paying to Oromia administration and recognizing Oromia Officials. On top of that, the establishment of new Kebeles[17] by Oromia Officials to levy tax from Oromo settlers on Gumuz land infuriated the B-G officials. Perceived as outright infringement on B-G regional autonomy, this act further complicated the already complex relation between the two neighboring regions (Ibid).

The above situation being a macro-level contestation and disagreement between the two regional states of Oromia and BGRS, the most serious conflict

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[16] The acronym BGRS stands for Benishangul -Gumuz Regional State.
[17] Kebele is the lowest administrative unit in Ethiopia.

was played out at micro-level, i.e., at the village level in which inter-communal and inter group violence turned out to be the deadliest. Such conflicts erupted at different times. The first of them (the bloodiest as it was dubbed by Worku, 2010) occurred in 1993 in the newly carved Belojeganfoye *Woreda* of Kamashi Zone in BGRS between Oromo and Gumuz ethnic groups. The conflict flared between the two ethnic groups when well-armed Gumuz informal militia attacked unarmed Oromo civilians killing 58 individuals on 29 September 1993. The absence of a clear border between the two regions and failure to negotiate on how to peacefully create one, and the unilateral designation of Soghie town as the capital of the newly formed Belojeganfoye *Woreda* (district) by BGRS authorities and the disagreement over it served as an immediate cause for the conflict (Worku, 2010:72; below see map of the two regional states and the conflict sites).
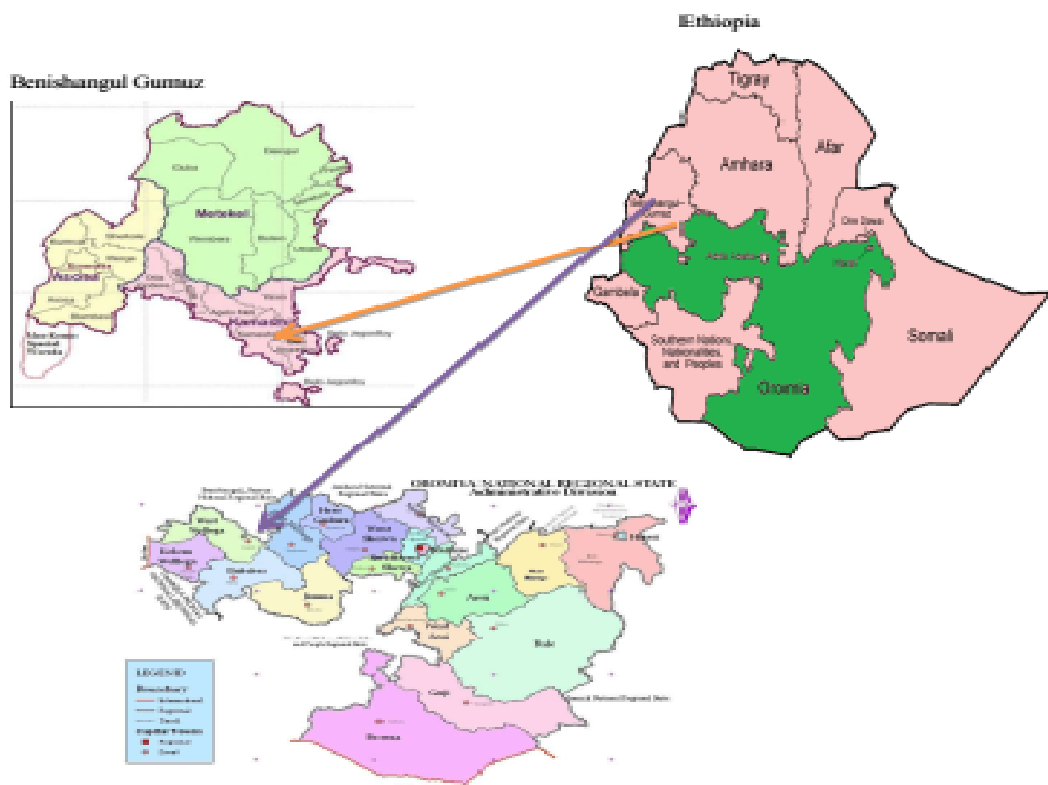

Fig.1. Map of Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia Regions with location of conflict sites (Kamashi and East Wollega) (**Source:** Reconfigured from different sources

The second Oromo-Gumuz conflict in Kamashi and East Wollega Zones erupted in May 2007 between Oromo of Haro-Limu and Gumuz of Yaso *Woreda* following the Killing of Joint Peace Committee members from Oromia (ibid). A year later in May 2008, the conflict erupted once again making the region a hotspot. Claims and counter-claims pertaining to the entitlement rights to farm lands and other resources, particularly Soghie town, the incessant migration and settlement of highlanders in the Gumuz inhabited lowlands, which created population pressure; the difficulty to demarcate borders between Oromo and Gumuz villages which were of mixed character as they lived in unison in the former Wollega province; the preemptive response of B-G authorities by resettling their people along Gumuz-Oromo borders as a buffer and attempt to contain the Oromo movement, and elite level agitations galvanized deep seated animosities and triggered the new conflict.

Above all, the mistrust between the Gumuz and Oromo elites and the suspicion held by the Gumuz elites that the Oromia region wants to incorporate Kamashi Zone into Oromia claiming its demographic superiority fueled the conflict (Asnake, 2009 and Worku, 2010).

5. The 2018 Oromo-Gumuz Conflict and Attendant Displacement

A closer glance at population dynamics in western Ethiopia over the past five decades shows that a huge migration of people from the highlands took place (organized or spontaneous) down the slope toward the lowland areas traditionally inhabited by shifting cultivators such as the Gumuz or towards those considered to be no man's land due to absence of human habitation.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed two developments in this regard: the expansion of state farms along the Angar and Dedessa River Valleys in Wollega that attracted laborers from the highlands, and the era of state sponsored resettlement of a huge number of draught afflicted population from northern Ethiopia into the same area in the 1980s (Zelalem, 2010, 2017a).

The period after 1991 witnessed another two developments. The first one was the continued migration and settlement of self-initiated migrants from northern Ethiopia who were joined by the surrounding Oromo migrants from the highlands of western Oromia (Eastern Wollega) in search of arable land and to benefit from the burgeoning cash crop production and export from the area. Following the boom in oil seeds production in which sesame, soya bean and other export items played an important role, the Angar & Dedessa valleys

lured many people both from afar and from closer proximity for settlement. The other development was the introduction of ethnic federalism that awarded a vast stretch of land along the contested Dedessa and Angar Valleys to the newly carved Benishangul Gumuz Region with attendant claim of sovereignty over these lands by the Gumuz.

All these developments significantly impacted the interaction between the Gumuz and non-Gumuz communities in the area. On the one hand, the Gumuz who felt and are still feeling the brunt of historic marginalization, enslavement, eviction, and retreatment into inhospitable lowland areas and consider these areas as their ancestral land sought ethnic federalism as an opportunity to assert their authority over the entire areas covered by bamboo forest. They have also seen the incessant migration of the highlanders and claims of the Oromo population for equal treatment in the area as a serious infringement on their sovereign right enshrined in the federal and regional constitution[18]. On the other, the migrant settlers also claimed a constitutional right to settlement and ownership of property anywhere in the country including usufruct right to land, referring the same federal constitution. These diametrically opposite claims and equivocal interpretation of the constitution have set in motion the deep seated animosities and triggered new conflict over resources in the area.

While such feelings were pervasive at macro level expressing the frosty relationship between the two regions, the BGRS authorities tried to contain further settlement of highlanders into the area through multiple strategies at local level. One of such strategies was a systematic resettlement of hitherto sparsely populated Gumuz population into nucleated villages along the Oromia-BGRS border as frontier guards. The other strategy was violent eviction of the migrant settlers or the threat of it.[19] Interestingly, despite such threats, people negotiated their relationships based on economic advantages. As a result, new economic interdependencies and alliances were forged between the Oromo migrant-settlers and Gumuz land owners. Informal land

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[18] Article 2 of the Benishangul-Gumuz regional Constitution stipulates that despite the presence other ethnic groups in the region, the real owners of the region are indigenous peoples comprised only of the Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo.
[19] According to my informants, until 1975 E.C., Belojeganfoye *Woreda*, currently a bone of contention between the Oromo and the Gumuz, was not occupied by any one. It was a traditional hunting ground for Oromo game hunters. The area was settled only after the establishment of a state farm which first drew Oromo daily laborers into the area followed by Gumuz who came from Yasso and Sasiga.

leases and deals started to determine inter-group relations instead of political interest. This encouraged the Oromo highlanders to come and work in the area as land leasee (renters of Gumuz land), land owners who purchased farm lands from the Gumuz, albeit in an informal way, or those who entered into share cropping arrangements. However, periodic breach of contractual agreements on land lease and attempts to reclaim lands sold in an informal way led to renewed conflicts that often degenerated into violent clashes (interview with displaced Oromo, *Obbo*[20] Daraje Bakala, 28 Feb. 2020, Nekemte).

In spite of these developments, for more than 15 years after the introduction of ethnic federalism, territorial disputes between the B-G and the Oromia region somehow remained within manageable range (Asnake, 2009). While there have been various skirmishes over the years over access to land or resources, ethnic tensions were for years suppressed by the EPRDF government. An extensive grassroots surveillance system allowed the government to suppress any emerging threats to its power and control. According to Asnake, besides overt suppression on any dissenting voices, the government used access to assistance, including to jobs, seeds, fertilizers, training opportunities, and food aid to ensure loyalty to the ruling party.

These tactics were so effective in part because the EPRDF controlled all levels of government from the highest levels in Addis down to village levels, making it relatively easy for party policies, philosophies, and intelligence gathering to be easily implemented across the country. Arbitrary arrests and use of excessive force to control protests were used when other systems of control and suppression did not work (IOM, 2020).

This has changed significantly in the year leading up to Dr. Abiy's becoming Prime Minister whereby tensions along ethnic lines over complex questions of identity led to loss of life and displacement across Ethiopia. Following the political transition of May 2018, the opening up of political space has allowed Ethiopians to express long-standing grievances, often over land, border demarcations, access to state resources, and perceived discrimination against their community or ethnic group, without fear of retribution (ibid). Local governance and security have sharply deteriorated in many locations. This lack of law and order means there are few constraints on how grievances are expressed. Along Oromia and B-G borders, this has resulted in clearing of

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[20] The word '*obbo*' in Afaan Oromo stands for word *Mister* in English

rival groups from land and housing, resulting in an open conflict between ethnic groups.

The above events being the underlying causes, the ambush and killing of four senior officials from the Benishangul Gumuz region in Gimbi, West Wollega of the Oromia region, by unidentified armed groups on 26 September 2018 became an immediate cause that sparked open armed clash in the area (D.T.M., 2019). This incident sparked similar conflict in Belojeganfoye *Woreda* of Kamashi Zone after a series of anti-Oromo meetings were staged in villages like Meťi and *Angar Shenkora*. The deliberations were exclusively made in Gumuz language to ensure the confidentiality of the content and objective of the meeting.

On 29 September 2018, five members of Qeeroo (Oromo youth) who came to Metti to help their Oromo kinsmen were killed by the Gumuz (Interview with *Obbo* Daraje Balay; Nekemte; 13 Feb. 2019). A massacre of 32 Oromo peasants took place on the following day when the news about the killing of a Gumuz called Belay (an agricultural Bureau worker) spread across the region. This sparked the mass displacement and flight of the Oromo from the area.

In general, the above incidents went beyond retaliatory measures sparking a wide ranging inter-communal violence in the Kamashi Zone of Benishangul-Gumuz region between the Gumuz community and the Oromo populations residing therein. The conflict resulted in death, injury, damage of public and private infrastructure, as well as deployment of security forces to Kamashi zone (interview with *Obbo* Tamiru Oljira; Nekemte; 13 Feb.2019).

In the aftermath of these events, the number of displaced people reportedly reached over 100,000, with more than 80,000 IDPs living in East and West Wollega and some 20,000 in Benishangul Gumuz, where a complex security situation did not allow rapid access to the affected areas. Two months after the displacement, reported figures had spiked up to 250,000 people between the two Regions, with numbers in East and West Wollega Zones reaching as high as 101,000 and 81,000 respectively (MSF assessment report, 2019).

6. Magnitude of the Conflict and Major Problems Faced by the Displaced Persons

The above conflict took its toll on Oromo communities residing in the two *Woredas* of Kamashi Zone, namely, Belojeganfoye and Yaso, which were the

hardest hit districts. Following this conflict, and out of fear of retaliatory killings, Oromo communities from the two *Woredas* fled the area, some to East Wollega Zonal capital, Nekemte, and collective sites while others took refuge among their relatives. In particular, the Oromo displacees from Yaso district took refuge among their relatives in the nearby Haro-Limu *Woreda*, in Oromia Regional State, while some from Belojeganfoye *Woreda* went to Saiga *Woreda* (Informants, Dadhitu Mosisa and Badhatu Dhuguma, 15/02/2020 Nekemte).

A "silent" emergency as it was dubbed by many aid agencies (see MSF assessment report 2019), this displacement took place while the government focus was more on Gedeo – Guji conflict in Southern Ethiopia. Thus it has received little or no media attention. With much of the operational attention on Gedeo and West Guji, the humanitarian community was also unprepared to face another significant acute crisis. According to MSF 2019, aid agency response started only in October 2018?, at a rather slow pace. The initial response was mostly limited to ad-hoc activities or one-shot interventions, with engagement from a limited number of NGOs and agencies.

Information gathered by the author indicated that in February 2020, from the IDPs residing in Nekemte town, many have lost their relatives and property (including livestock) due to the conflict. The case of *Adde*[21] Chaltu (name changed for security reasons), best illustrates the atrocities perpetrated by the Gumuz against the Oromo at the pick of the conflict in Belojeganfoye *Woreda*.

> Following the death of the Gumuz officials allegedly at the hands of the Oromo assassins, the Gumuz from every walk of life: officials, ordinary men and women, young and adult began to enter Oromo villages, set fire on houses, chased people killing them by poisoned arrows, shooting and even slaughtering them like a sacrificial animal leaving no one alive even children, and the elderly. I and my two daughters with a seven year old son of my younger daughter   first went to hide in the forest with our cattle. Staying there for three days, we realized that they will find us sooner or later.   Finally, we resorted to hiding in the house of a neighboring Amhara since the violence was directed against Oromo instead of Amhara settlers. We stayed in the Amhara house for a while

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[21] The word '*Adde*' in Afaan Oromo represents 'Miss' in English. Take note that all the names of the informants are changed due to ethical and safety reasons. Only pseudo-names are used.

until the Gumuz crowd came and threatened them not to hide any Oromo in their house. Soon after the Gumuz left, our Amhara neighbors told us to leave their house. Left with no option, we went hiding in a nearby pit latrine. Being suffocated by the filthy smell of the latrine, my grandson run out of it. However, he was immediately spotted by the Gumuz who chased, caught and slaughtered him like a beast. Seeing her son being caught by the Gumuz, his mother burst in cry and run to rescue him, but fell prey to the merciless Gumuz. The cruel Gumuz caught her too and cut her throat with the same knife her son was slaughtered. After that the Gumuz went further dancing and ululating in search of another Oromo prey. Witnessing all this with my elderly daughter we run into the forest. After two days of journey we entered into the Sasiga *Woreda* and told our story to the authorities in the area who took us to the nearby collective IDP site. From there we were later transferred to Nekemte. Now, the IDP camps both in Nekemte and other areas are closed down, because the government has decided to return us to B-G region, i.e., Belojeganfoye *Woreda* from which we were displaced.

Asked whether or not she is willing to return back, *Adde* Chaltu replied that

I stayed in IDP camp for over seven months. After we were ordered to leave the camp, I rented a small room in Nekemte and lived there, but no longer afford to pay for the rental house and life expenses. Despite that atrocious memory, if conditions get better and there is a guarantee for safe return, I would go back. Things however, have not changed. Once upon a time, the government authorities told us that peace has been negotiated with the B-G authorities, the military is deployed in the area together with local security forces; shelter is available and soon we will be fully rehabilitated. Trustful of what they told us, I went to see the reality with my naked eyes. Upon arrival, no shelter was there. Instead I saw the very Gumuz who killed my daughter and my grandson. My cattle were grazing in their back yard. One of them saw me and asked why I returned back. He yelled at me…, look at this knife, it is the same knife with which I cut your daughter's and grandson's throat. It still carries their blood. If you stay here, you will face the same fate. He shouted: get lost from here before I send this knife into your belly. (Interview with *Adde* Chaltu, 23 Feb. 2020, Nekemte).

The above case story indicates two things: on the one hand, it clearly shows the magnitude of atrocities perpetrated with impunity, and a collective

punitive act unleashed against a designated common enemy (the Oromo in this case) in the name and interest of a titular ethnic group (the Gumuz) who were granted full entitlement right in the area as indigenous people. In the words of the informants, the perpetrators were both officials wielding formal political power and ordinary members of the Gumuz ethnic group whose actions were sanctioned by the power holders. On the other hand, this incident demonstrated the fact that in spite of numerical majority, power imbalance and higher firepower can tilt the tide of warfare in favor of a minority group. Because, during the interview, the displaced Oromo respondents claimed that they are far more numerous than the Gumuz in the area, but lacked legal support and the necessary firepower to defend themselves in the face of attack. They reiterated that besides traditional weapons, the Gumuz were armed with modern machine guns such as AK 14 (interview with *Obbo* Daraje Bakala and *Obbo* Tolera Sori, 28 Feb. 2020 Nekemte).

With regard to government plans to return IDPs to their original places of domicile, the informants told that it was done hastily without due preparation and adequate consultation. They reiterated the failure of the federal or local government to apprehend the culprits and bring them to justice. In addition, the absence formal reconciliation would not guarantee peaceful return and prevent resurgence of the conflict. This fact was corroborated by the words of my informant *Obbo* Daraje Balay. He stated that

> I lived in Belojeganfoye *Woreda* since the *Derg* period. Born in Limu *Woreda* of the former Wollega province, I first went to the lowland area as a daily laborer to one of the *Derg* period Wollega state farms. After the dissolution of the state farm, I settled in the nearby vicinity as a private farmer securing about five hectares of land. I cultivated a variety of crops: corn, sesame, soya bean, etc. and earned a very good return. While other late comers rented land from the Gumuz, I worked on my own land and enjoyed a very good life. I had no problem with my Gumuz neighbors either. Even during the past conflicts between the Oromo and Gumuz, they didn't do any harm against me. Elite level agitation, particularly constructed claims/stories about the past injustices: enslavement and exploitation of the Gumuz by the Oromo as well as eviction from their ancestral lands, narrated by a certain Doctor called Mekonnen, started to spoil our relations.[22] Finally, when the story about

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[22] In addition to the historical injustices narrated by the Gumuz elites, the change of government at the federal level that brought prominent Oromo political figures at the helm of power and the pan-Ethiopian rhetoric unleashed in the course of the transition were perceived

the assassination of the four Gumuz officials arrived in our locality, the Gumuz went crazy. They started to kill anybody on their way. In fear of the looming danger, I fled to Nekemte with my family leaving behind all my properties. Until the government closed the IDP camp, I lived there. Now I live in Nekemte town in a rental house without any support. I earn a living by engaging in any casual activity that brings money. When the government called upon us to return, I spearhead a group of returnees and went back to Belojeganfoye. But, the situation was so bad that the professed peace and security appeared to me illusionary. Because the culprits are still at large, no reconciliation is on the horizon and sense of insecurity is hovering on every returnee's mind. Realizing the possibility that as soon as the military leaves the area the Gumuz can attack us, I returned back to Nekemte, (Interview with *Obbo* Daraje Bakala, 28 Feb. 2020, Nekemte).

What is more atrocious about this displacement is that these IDPs were robbed not only of their properties and productive assets, but also their dignity, and self-worth. Disrupted from familiar environments to which their skills and practices have been familiar, community networks, and a sense of local belonging, now they are obliged to lead a miserable life in an urban setting where their skills hardly fit and ensure economic success, not to mention the difficulty to forge reliable networks to count on in time of despair. Impoverished livelihoods and lack of end in sight to the country's unbaiting inter-ethnic conflict keep them worried about what the future holds for them and their children.

7. Summary and Conclusion

A. Summary

The current study indicated that inter-ethnic relations in Western Ethiopia is far too complex than we see them today. The current conflict and attendant displacement has to be analyzed against the backdrop of historical relations

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by the authorities in B-G with grave concern. On the one hand the move was seen as a prelude to the reversal of ethnic federalism; on the other, as a preparation to the empowerment of the Oromo in the region while disempowering the Gumuz. According to the informants, amidst this fear, the emergence of Oromo Youth (*Qeeroo*) in the area waving the portraits of Prime Minster Abiy and his ex-staunch ally Mr. Lemam Megersa, the then president of Oromia Region, has seriously angered the Gumuz (Interview with *Obbo* Daraje and Tamiru, Feb.13,2019, Nekemte).

forged by the diverse ethnic groups in the region. The analysis has shown that the relationship between the Oromo and the Gumuz communities has been bumpy all along exhibiting twists and shifts depending on events unfolding at the grass-root level and in conjunction with a change in the policies of the central government after the incorporation of the whole region into the Ethiopian State. The early encounter between the Oromo and the Gumuz was asymmetrical as many of the areas hitherto inhabited by the Gumuz were overrun and overtaken by the expanding Oromo clans. This has been followed by the establishment of patron-client relationship between the victorious Oromos and the subjugated Gumuz in some areas. In areas where strong resistances were met, the Oromo imposed a status of slavery on captive Gumuz, albeit at a domestic level. In most cases, however, the Gumuz resorted to avoidance strategy and retreated back into remote inhospitable lowlands engaging neither in any form of social integration, nor in conflict. All these have changed after the incorporation of the whole region into the centralized Ethiopian state that has drawn the isolated Gumuz communities into the orbit of the central government's taxation system. Following the establishment of the Wollega Governorate under the rule of *Dejazmach* Kumssa Moreda, the Oromo were given the power to collect taxes from the Gumuz as a representative of the imperial government. During this period, sporadic conflicts occurred due to over-taxation and maladministration; though ethnic based disputes were nonexistent.

The *Derg* period witnessed the expansion of large scale state farms along the Dedessa and Angar valleys and the resettlement of drought affected population from northern Ethiopia in similar localities. All these events have drawn the hitherto isolated Gumuz communities into a multi-cultural milieu, which intensified their social, cultural and economic interactions with their new neighbors. Despite the complex nature of this interaction, no visible inter-communal tension emerged during this period.

Following the ascendance of EPRDF to the helm of power in Ethiopia and the adoption of ethnic federalism, things have changed dramatically. Boundaries were redrawn between the newly carved regional states of Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz. This division was arbitrary and often times dissecting communities of similar socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The mixed nature of the Gumuz villages with that of Oromos in many areas made it too difficult to redraw boundaries. Claims and counter claims over control of these areas drew a wedge between the two communities and this has become the nucleus for future confrontations. In addition to this, the division of the people

in the Benishangul-Gumuz region into titular and non-titular citizens has created a power imbalance relegating the non-Gumuz to a subordinate status. This, in turn, has become another source of conflict. Besides the federal Constitution, the regional Benishangul-Gumuz constitution has conferred an exclusive political right and control over the resources of the region on the titular ethnic groups at the expense of the others. So, the Gumuz who wield uncontested political power in the Kamashi Zone now begun to control resources, particularly land, denying others similar opportunity. In spite of this, partly due to population pressure on the highlands, but most importantly lured by fertile land and lucrative cash crop production in the Gumuz controlled lowlands, the Oromo and other highlanders, including the Amhara, have continued to come and settle in the area. This was not seen by the Gumuz as a simple economic migration but rather as an encroachment on their sovereign rights. It is therefore the resource quest instead of ethnicity that set in motion the recent conflict and attendant displacement discussed above.

B. Conclusion

From the information gathered in the course of this study, it is possible to conclude that conflicts in the Kamashi Zone of BGRS are overwhelmingly resource-based. The motivation for displacing non-Gumuz, particularly the Oromo, could be related to three factors: firstly, it is an attempt to defend Gumuz sovereignty or exclusive right over the region and its resources as enshrined in the Regional Constitution; secondly, it was a means of containing further migration and settlement of Oromo communities in the area, and finally it's a demonstration of force and resolve by local authorities that they can repel encroachment by bigger regions like Oromia when it comes to defending their community's well-being. Behind all these confrontations lurk elite level agitation and homegrown xenophobic sentiments propagated over the years and unleashed by recent political open up. As indicated in the prefatory remarks of this study, besides the above reasons, the current conflict was set in motion by two important factors: (a) a fear that the pan-Ethiopian rhetoric unleashed by the 2018 change of leadership would undermine ethnic federalism from which the historically marginalized communities like Gumuz have significantly benefited, and (b) the chaotic power shakeup that followed the 2018 political transition in the wake of which purged and disgruntled former political cadres emerged as a potent destabilizing force by pitting one ethnic group against another.

In general, it was found that inter-communal tension stemming from claims of exclusionary political and economic rights by a titular ethnic group in the current study area represents only a single episode among the myriad of similar claims across the nation. Moreover, atrocities perpetrated against citizens in the fulfillment of such claims including killing, and displacement from habitual places of residence epitomize serious breach of the law of the land, and violation of the spirit and principles of human and democratic rights enshrined in the FDRE Constitution (see article 13 of FDRE constitution). Nevertheless, since these exclusionary claims partly emanate from misreading of the federal constitution or a deliberate reference to BGRS constitution and application of a provision inscribed in the article 2 of the regional constitution, there is a need for awareness raising endeavor to enhance a better understanding of the essence and content of the federal constitution, and subsequent revision of the normative foundations on which the BGRS constitution is built. The ultimate solution, however, rests on abrogation of article 2 of the BGRS constitution for it represents a bad precedent and grave transgression of the right to liberty of movement, and freedom to choose place of residence anywhere in the country, which is enshrined in article 32 (1) of the FDRE Constitution.

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