

Global Poverty and Post-colonial “Development Agendas”: Ethiopia and the West

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When one thinks of the word ‘agenda’ a few obvious meanings may come to mind – a list of things to do, a plan for a meeting, a goal to achieve or perhaps even an ideology. In the context of international development aid an agenda often means something altogether very different – a plan or goal that guides someone’s behaviour and is often not explicitly stated. Development aid agendas do not always reflect the needs and desires of the people they propose to serve. More often than not development agendas serve those who institute and organise them. Be it international development donors or governments who receive billions in aid subsidies, development aid and assistance is hardly ever free from condition or expectation on either the donor or receiver side.

The world of international aid is a multi-trillion dollar exercise with transactions affecting every country on earth. Some give, some receive, some give and receive, but all are involved in aid flows that are ultimately held up as virtuous considerations of man to fellow man. The world has long been used to the cycles of dependency and desperation that these aid flows illustrate. Ethiopia, for example, with its frequent food insecurity issues and prominence as a major receiver of international aid is perhaps the most perfect example of aid desperation and dependency. In 2011 alone Ethiopia received \$3.6 billion in Overseas

Development Aid (ODA)^[1]. This enormous figure represents over half of the Ethiopian regime’s annual revenue. With the international community’s growing concerns for security and economic interests in the Horn of Africa it is not difficult to imagine how this ODA necessitates a certain amount of condition or expectation for the Ethiopian regime. It is, after all, somewhat unrealistic to expect international donors to hand over vast amounts of money to a regime that neither fits the neat description of sympathetic governance nor reflects the tenets of democracy.

A pragmatic view of the complexities of handing over millions of Dollars, Euros, Pounds or Renminbi might even posit that development aid should never be without condition. Perhaps it shouldn’t. For example, if a country like Uganda continues to give oxygen to a ferocious anti-homosexual lobby then its ability to receive development aid may be seriously compromised by its donor partners. The diplomatic and international donor furore that

erupted in response to the Ugandan ‘anti-gay’ bill^[2] which was first proposed to the parliament in 2009 (the bill proposes the death penalty for some same-sex acts and criminalises others) and is still before parliament has highlighted the moral leverage that ODA can play in promoting human rights. Threats and petitions to reduce or withdraw aid from Uganda have largely been credited with halting Uganda’s fervour in passing the bill thus far (the United Kingdom and the United States have both threatened to cut aid to Uganda if it passed the bill). These threats and petitions from major donors have largely

been met in Uganda with the rancorous response that the West is trying to impose a “gay agenda” on Africa.

If by ‘agenda’ Uganda means a position that promotes the human rights of people who are homosexual then it is very difficult to argue that the international donor community is not justified in using its financial prowess to resist such human rights abuses. However, despite its use of such leverage, the question arises as to why the West fails miserably at propagating its ‘gay agenda’ in countries such as Russia and Saudi Arabia where similar human rights abuses are codified in law. A similar question can be posed as to why Western governments and donor agencies would supply a country such as Ethiopia, with its record of human rights abuses^[3], with enough money to continue functioning – business as usual? Evidently agendas are not uniform, but instead are situation and country specific. Everybody has an agenda but what matters is the power-outcome dynamic that governs the particular agenda.

With regards to ODA in Ethiopia, to even begin to understand the agendas in play one has to look at the Ethiopian regime’s most ostensible economic development *raison d’être* – utilising the country’s vast agricultural potential to become a middle income country by 2025. Under the so-called Agricultural Development Led Industrialisation (ADLI) programme[4] the regime purports to elevate the vast amount of the country’s population out of grinding poverty in just over a decade. A potential feat that has everyone from the EU Commission to USAID dancing in the bleachers. Never mind that Ethiopia suffers catastrophically from a cycle of food insecurity, famine and dependency and is consistently languishes in the lower echelons of the UNDP’s Human Development Index[5] (currently 173rd out of 187 countries and territories around the world), the World Bank[6] approved ADLI is supposedly saving the day. When everything appears to be going to plan a blind eye is easily turned to the realities that stifle the lives of millions. It is far easier for a non-critical West to accept and fund the ostensible agenda of lifting millions out of poverty rather than the less palatable one of maintaining an unjust regime’s vice-like grip on power and control as long as its security and economic interests are upheld.

The interplay between development agendas, the regime and its tightening stranglehold on Ethiopian society permeates most areas of life in Ethiopia. Higher education development is one example of how the development agenda is being used to steady fasten the regime’s hold over the country. In the last 15 years the country has gone from having 2 federal universities to 31, serving more than 90,000 new enrollments annually.

While this number is still small for a country of its size (it represents only 3% of the relevant cohort as opposed to 6% in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa) the rapid expansion of universities across the country has left many questioning the motivation behind a sudden investment (40% of the total education budget goes on higher education) in higher education development. On the one hand the regime has touted higher education as a means to serve the growing need for qualified and competent workers who can facilitate its desire to reach the status of a middle income country. A satisfying explanation for those who green light the billions that are transferred to the regime annually. On the other hand the Ethiopian higher education system is frequently admonished by critics of the regime as aiding and abetting its stranglehold on Ethiopian society by creating a new layer of loyal party elites, locking education attainment into regime membership and using the lecture hall as a podium for its own propaganda. This is one agenda that doesn’t fit well with the Western cooperation and development narrative used to justify huge transfers of funds into

the regime's coffers.

Another agenda that doesn't fit so well with development narratives, but one that is no less easy to countenance, is that of the international agri-biotech industry and its influence on development aid. The nexus between the huge financial interests of companies such as Monsanto and development aid has seen greater emphasis on agri-biotech solutions for Ethiopia's chronic food insecurity issues being placed on agriculture development initiatives in recent years. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, provides millions towards 'improving' Ethiopia's agricultural industry, most notably through its cooperation with the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)^[7].

Agra is a partnership organisation whose members include DFID, The Rockefeller Foundation, The International Development Research Centre, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, the African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development, the Association for European Parliamentarians for Africa and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It receives funding from governments and organisations around the world, including USAID, DFID, SIDA, and DANIDA to name a few^[8].

AGRA aims 'to achieve a food secure and prosperous Africa through the promotion of rapid, sustainable agricultural growth based on smallholder farmer'. While such an agenda is commendable the organisation's connection with Monsanto, a company that has a long history of locking farmers into commercial relations which require them to buy their patented seeds and use their chemicals in order to grow their crops, is less commendable. In 2010 the Gates Foundation purchased \$23 million worth of shares in Monsanto. The Gates foundation, in what many would suspect as a cynical public relations exercise to try to separate itself from the murky reputation of Monsanto, has tried to distance itself by saying that its philanthropic and business arms don't influence each other. One has to wonder though as to what extent this unholy alliance does not influence each other's agendas and how much of this is about profit making rather than philanthropy.

Taking into account the prominence of the agri-biotech industry in global agriculture and its closeness to policy makers (as evidenced in confidential cables leaked by Wikileaks^[9] which showed that the United States was vehemently against the Ethiopian Biosafety Proclamation^[10] and lobbied to scrap it) it is clear that the connection between the agri-biotech industry and development goes further than a non-influential relationship. Increasingly higher education is the vehicle used to facilitate this relationship. Western agri-biotechs and ODA agencies are heavily involved in funding academic endeavours at Ethiopian universities which aim to improve food security and achieve the ADLI agenda of middle income status. On the more benevolent side ODA agencies such as SIDA and Irish Aid fund sustainable bio-resource programmes at various Ethiopian universities (SIDA funds the Bio-resources Innovations Network for Eastern Africa Development programmewhich is partnered with Addis Ababa University and Hawassa University and Irish Aid Funds the Potato Centre of Excellence partnered with Arba Minch University). On the other side organisations such as AGRA, with its connection to Monsanto through one of its main funders is heavily involved with agricultural projects at Haramaya University and the Ethiopian Institute for Agricultural Research^[11]. Considering what is available openly on these organisations websites it doesn't take your inner conspiracy theorist to connect the massive agri-biotech industry's agenda to Ethiopia's ADLI programme.

The development narrative may not sit so easily with the commercial agendas of big business but it is there for anyone to see. Governments and development agencies may be reluctant to admit the full extent of their development agendas for fear that their commercial and security interests may be compromised. Should this even matter when at the end of the day ordinary peoples' lives are improving? Morality aside, it probably shouldn't if indeed this is so. In Ethiopia's case the evidence for this improvement is marginal. It is true that fewer people are dying from preventable famine, just as it is true that Ethiopia has the dubious honour of having the fastest growing rate of dollar millionaires per capita in Africa[12].

In excess of 35 million Ethiopians still live in abject poverty subsisting on less than \$2 a day while a tiny fraction of the country's 85 million people has become excessively rich. As more and more ODA is pumped into the country Ethiopia's HDI rank hasn't improved (in fact it has gone from 169th in the world to 173rd in the last decade), journalists, academics and opposition figures are still jailed for speaking out against the regime, ethnic minorities such as the Oromo are discriminated against and forced off their lands, corruption and human rights abuses are still rife. Less people may be dying but are ordinary peoples' lives improving at a rate that warrants the West to turn a blind eye to the crimes of those in power? It may suit certain agendas to do so but it does a massive disservice to ordinary Ethiopians.

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Notes

[1] OECD DAC Statistics Ethiopia 2011 <http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/ETH.gif>

[2] Human Rights Watch Uganda Country Report 2013
<http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/uganda?page=3>

[3] Human Rights Watch Ethiopia World Report 2013
<http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/ethiopia>

[4] Ethiopian Government Portal ADLI
http://www.ethiopia.gov.et/policies-and-strategies1?p_p_id=77&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=maximized&p_p_mode=view&_77_struts_action=%2Fjournal_content_search%2Fsearch

[5] UNDP's Human Development Index <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/>

[6] World Bank Ethiopia Cooperation
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2012/08/16702735/ethiopia-country-partnership-strategy>

[7] AGRA in Ethiopia - <http://www.agra.org/where-we-work/ethiopia/>

[8] List of Donors to AGRA <http://www.agra.org/AGRA/en/who-we-are/donors/>

[9] Wikileaks Cables on Biosafety Proclamation

<http://danielberhane.com/2011/09/28/wikileaks-us-opposed-to-biosafety-in-ethiopia-4-cables-full-text/>

[10] Ethiopian Environmental Protection Authority's Biosafety Proclamation

<http://www.unep.org/biosafety/files/ETNBFrep.pdf>

[11] AGRA Funded Academic Programmes

<http://www.agra.org/grants/soil-health-program/shp-ethiopia/>

[12] Ethiopia hailed as 'African lion' with fastest creation of millionaires.

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