SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF DISPLACEMENT: THE CASE OF DISPLACED PERSONS IN ADDIS ABABA

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ABSTRACT It is estimated that 1.67 million Ethiopians were displaced between 1991 and 1994. The wars between Ethiopia and Eritrea, for example, resulted in the displacement of thousands of families from their homes in Eritrea. Some of these persons have been rehabilitated and reintegrated into their respective communities. But an overwhelming majority is still living in tents, *Kebele* Halls, grain stores, plastic shelters, and on streets. At present, they are living in untold misery. Despite the magnitude of the problems of displaced persons (commonly called the '*tefenakkai*', literally 'the uprooted'), there is no adequate or comprehensive information on their social and economic situation. In the absence of this, it is difficult to plan long-term rehabilitation programs, which are instrumental for reduction of urban impoverishment and anomie. In Ethiopia, very little attention has been accorded to displacement - a social process that disrupts social order. This paper tries to address the socio-cultural dimensions of displacement in Addis Ababa, with particular reference to the Mekanissa-Qorre area. This group is the largest of the 16 similar displaced groups in the city. Women and children who constitute the largest part of the displaced receive a special emphasis in this paper.

Key Words: War; Displacement; Impoverishment; Anomie; Rehabilitation.

INTRODUCTION

Forced displacement as a social process that transforms existence has been accorded little attention and its socio-cultural dimension has also been grossly overlooked. This paper addresses those concerns as they refer specifically to the displaced persons that are commonly called '*tefenakkai*'[1] (literally, 'the uprooted'), who were displaced by the Ethio-Eritrea war in 1991 and now living in the Mekanissa locality of Addis Ababa. This group is the largest of the 16 similar ones in the city. Especial emphasis is given to the situation of women and children who constitute the largest part of the displaced.

The social consequences of uprooting for the individual are estrangement and alienation. Family support, kin ties and primary and secondary group relations are broken. In the town from which most of the respondents originate, the boundary between the family and the surrounding community is fluid. The family provides its members with links to the community.

SOCIAL RISKS OF DISPLACEMENT

The social-anthropological approach to resettlement compels us to explore not only how displacement threatens individuals with impoverishment, but also how society may be affected as a whole, in its structure and fabric. Integrating the risks discussed in chapter three at the societal level, Cernea writes:

> Forced displacement tears apart existing communities and structures of social organization, interpersonal ties, and the enveloping social fabric. Kinship groups tend to get scattered. Life-sustaining informal networks of mutual help, local voluntary associations, and self-organized service arrangements are dismantled. The destabilization of community life is apt to generate a typical state of anomie, crisis-laden insecurity, and loss of a sense of cultural identity (Cernea, 1997: 34).

The study at this particular site found various manifestations of social disarticulation, such as growing alienation and anomie, the loosening of kinship bonds, the weakening of control on interpersonal behavior and lower cohesion in family structures. The displaced persons obligations towards and relationships with non-displaced kinsmen were eroded and interaction between individual families was reduced. As a result, communal feasts and interfamilial socializations were discontinued and daily informal social interaction was severely curtailed. Following are some of the major manifestations of social disarticulation among the displaced persons in the present context.

I. Socio-Cultural Confusion and Loss of Identity

Displacement has brought about socio-cultural confusion; cultural estrangement and loss of social identity because most displaced people can no longer uphold deep-rooted values, norms, and social institutions. The evasion of customary obligations to widows and orphans is an example of disintegration caused by impoverishment. In other cases, however, the confusion stems from socio-cultural displacement. Loss of cultural traditions creates deep psychological distress among displaced people who are coping with the humiliating realities of their new camp life.

Among two scores of teenagers, for instance, whom I randomly talked to about the customary telling of patrilineal ancestors, only three could narrate up to their great-grandfathers; the rest could not go beyond that. Only few knew the name of the village their family originally came from and none could narrate the history of their families.

II. Family Disintegration

The most obvious disruption in the socio-cultural organization of the displaced persons has been the disintegration of family structures. Death due to the

war has dramatically increased the number of widows and orphans, and many family members are separated when they flee from the war zone or when men join the combat. Before displacement, a male relative of the deceased, usually a brother, cared for widows and orphans. General destitution, however, has forced relatives to evade this customary obligation; as a result, women head most displaced households. In a society in which authority over children is vested in the male head of the family (a father or a first degree relative), a household headed by a woman exercises little authority over its children.

Out of the 46 respondents 21% missed someone from the family before leaving Asmara or Dekemehari and 34% experienced family disintegration during the flight due to mainly fatal sickness, disappearance and conflict on the way. The other 29% went through the same experience in the post-flight period due to certain disagreements or misunderstanding.

III. Psychosocial Consequences

An increase in psychological and psychiatric disturbances among the displaced, maybe caused, at least partly, by socio-cultural displacement. This distress does not result simply from the anticipation of future calamity. It is also a consequence of past experience. Virtually everyone in the area of armed conflict has been personally affected by the tragedies of the war. Many have watched loved ones die in pain from bullets wounds, burns, or sickness. A few have also watched on their way out of Asmara the corpses of their loved ones burned or lie swollen on a roadside on the outskirts of the town. Asmeret Haile,[2] 41, tells her story with tears as follows:

> As we were being led into a bus that was to take us to Adigrat out of the kebele compound where we stayed for two days after being expelled from our homes a certain sight struck me like lightning so much so that I could not stand. It was my husband's corpse on which a *shaabia* (EPLF) soldier stood shouting "*adgi, wodi adgi*"(meaning for donkey, son of donkey). I am not allowed to cry loudly let alone perform burial for him. I could not restrain the hot tears running down my cheeks. The image is as fresh as that of yesterday which haunts me almost every night. I wonder what has happened to the corpse ... had hyenas devoured or vultures pecked at it with the bones scattered everywhere? What shall I say?

Like the aforementioned respondent, most of the displaced persons indicated that memories of the event remain with them... causing extreme nightmares, daily intrusive flashbacks of the traumatic events, fear, insecurity and bitterness. Indeed, one of the most significant war traumas of all, particularly for younger children, is simply separation from parents – often more distressing than the war activities themselves. Adolescents also face particular problems. They are at a time of life when they are undergoing many physical and emo-

tional changes. Some respondents mentioned suicidal attempt by young adults who are in a state of depression and who have increased levels of aggression and delinquency.

IV. Streetism

Because of family disintegration, the number of street children in urban areas has reached alarming proportions. Deprived of decent housing, a balanced diet, and education or training opportunities, street children are faced with a miserable future. The young adults on the street are vulnerable to numerous risks including HIV/AIDS due to their involvement in "survival sex" (prostitution). About 75% of the fifty thousand street children in Addis Ababa are home-based and the remainder live totally in street corners begging, robbing and doing anything available for survival (Tekahun, 2003: 20). From the information gathered from the respondents in this study more than 25% of the children live completely on the streets while the remaining 56% are home-based.

Streetism is a danger that undermines particularly the potential and development of children. It is a liability to society when they are found without a true home for warmth, and without love and care for a sense of belonging. They are spotted at street corners, both during the day and the night struggling for survival by whatever means possible. Drug addiction, child labor and violence are other key products of streetism, which add to the crime wave and disturb the peace of the city.

V. Prostitution

The prevalence of prostitution, referred to as 'survival sex' among the displaced persons in this study, is relatively high. Young widows are common within the displaced community, comprising more than a quarter of all heads of households. Fleeing from poverty, these young girls search for work in urban centers and eventually find themselves engaged in uncommitted sexual partnerships. Multipartnership is common as women outnumber men in this context.

It is observed that prostitution has two forms here: full time and part-time. Among my respondents some are doing it infrequently when their income from their work as a day laborer fails to meet their rudimentary needs and the majority of the prostitutes fall in the previous category where they take it as a permanent means of income.

VI. Stigmatization and Low Self-Esteem

The displaced community has suffered the effects of stigmatization in all phases of the displacement experience. According to the information from 65% of my informants, right from the start, their neighbors with whom they lived for not less than 15 years have failed them by reporting their ethnic background to the Eritrean force that expelled them immediately. One of my infor-

mants[3] called Teberih expressed her feelings as follows:

> Those very neighbors with whom we spent together years of happiness and sadness, ups and downs, turned overnight to be traitors, and it was an overwhelming shock and sense of uselessness that I felt at the sight of my once good neighbors but now betrayers at the side of our expellers.

On top of this, during the time of flight in Tigrai most of them did not receive even the slightest welcome from the community, which was expected to be supportive due to its ethnic affinity to the displaced persons. When asked the reason why she didn't stay at Adigrat or Mekele, her birth place, and where her relatives live, Teberih responded:

> When the *Shabia* told us in Asmara that we would be shortly moved to Ethiopia, my initial plan was to stay with my mother who used to live in Adigrat but upon arrival the discrimination and rudeness of the people of Adigrat towards us was unbearable. For instance, they covered their nose when they passed by us and insulted us as mercenary. Then I decided not to see that land again and came to Addis Ababa where I have no one to depend on for food and shelter.

This study has found that the community around the camp views the displaced persons as a problem rather than as individuals with problems, which are not of their making. They are seen as secretive, untrustworthy and suspicious individuals and not as people from specific cultures and societies.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Social integration refers to the way in which the displaced persons relate to the social environment in the host community. Homans (1965: 133) also proposes that 'the more frequently persons interact with one another, the stronger their sentiments of friendship for one another are apt to be'. Thus, social integration starts with the establishment of contacts between displaced persons and their host. It is through social interaction that barriers are removed, attitudes changed and differences ironed out. Common interests are recognized and accommodations made only if interaction takes place.

I. The Informal Economy as Social Integrator

The informal economy plays a pivotal role in the survival of the displaced people. These economic activities, furthermore, serve as integrators between the displaced and the host community.

1. *Participation in the local labor market*

Once integrated into the informal economy labor market, the great majority of the respondent population is subjected to carry on any kind of activity, namely the performance of low-skilled or unskilled work. Sixty nine percent of the employed respondents fit presently into the "unskilled workers" category: the women are working in housekeeping and cleaning services while the men are working as bricklayer's assistants, masons and iron benders in construction. This, according to summarized information from respondents, has served to establish active relationships between the displaced and the non-displaced communities.

2. *The role of small businesses*

Individuals from the host community establish small shops where the displaced usually come to buy items for daily consumption like flour, sugar, oil and the like. Moreover, the telephone service rendered at these mini-shops attracts many of the displaced and the host community where preliminary interaction begins. The many inns for local alcoholic drinks [*tella bets* and *tej bets*] gather a lot of people from both communities where almost every kind of idea gets a platform and extemporized discussions flicker in a seemingly muddled manner. People get to know each other and brokerage is conducted as artisans and daily laborers are connected to employers.

The fact that the displaced people in their entirety receives water and power supply at a slightly expensive price from the host community, has also effected a link where friendship is fostered particularly among the children and female members of the two communities under consideration. One of my respondents[4] commented about her relationship with her water suppliers as follows:

> I like fetching water not as a hobby but because it was the first instance where I built a relationship with residents in this neighborhood and still is an opportunity to relate to them. Now the young girl of their family is my best friend and I sometimes go to their place and watch TV and I do *shurubas* [hair braiding] for the female members of the family for free, but of course they usually do not send me home empty-handed. It became customary that whenever there is some sort of celebration at their residence, not only me but also my family would be invited.

II. Voluntary Organizations

Membership in voluntary associations and clubs in which both immigrants and non-immigrants are members constitutes an important social link between them (Breton, 1964). Even voluntary associations established by the displaced persons play important integrative roles. They function as substitutes for the traditional social structures such as the family and kinship groups. They cushion separations from the family and community by providing a basis for mutual support and acceptance among members (Little, 1965; Radecki, 1979). They

provide a setting where displaced persons meet and establish ties. Thus, voluntary organizations have an integrative function in displaced communities. The displaced persons who belong to a voluntary association avoid loneliness which otherwise could lead them to anomie. As Durkheim (1951) argues, social isolation and the subsequent lack of social control are conditions that favor anomic behavior.

Displaced persons and the host population usually belong to different voluntary associations because it is often difficult, if not impossible, for newcomers of different economic and cultural backgrounds to join the voluntary organizations of their hosts. Moreover, the displaced persons see themselves as incapable of fulfilling the financial and social demands of such organizations.

In the subsequent part, I will discuss how displaced people organize themselves in pursuit of different objectives, as the way people organize themselves reveals something about the nature and dynamics of social relations in a given place and situation.

1. *Kinship-based network*

Kinship-based networks are particularly good at mobilizing human and financial resources for particular purposes, and because they entail long-term involvement they may also appear particularly generous in their terms of exchange and assistance.

Twenty six percent of my respondents indicated that they get most of the assistance needed from a family network established with close and distant relatives living in some other places usually during times of bereavement and weddings.

2. *Community-based associations*

Like other self-help groups building on social solidarity, community-based organizations have proved to be a source of strength with different purposes. Some primarily function to help community members when they face temporary personal crises related to, for example, the death of a family member. Others are savings and credit associations where members regularly contribute a small amount to a common fund, which is then distributed to the members in rotation, or when a particular need arises.

The commonest institution among the displaced is *edir*, which is a form of traditional social institution that is established by mutual agreement of community members in order to collaborate with each other whenever any member or their family members face an adverse situation. The primary function of the *edir* among the displaced is taking care of the burial and consolatory activities when death occurs among members. There are four *edirs* in the community of the displaced on the basis of proximity and all of them consist of different ethnic and religious groups irrespective of gender. Each member contributes two Birr every month and the whole body of members elects the *edir* leaders, a group of five persons, every two years. The contributed money is used for the purchase of burial materials such as the coffin, payment to the church for

conducting burial ceremony and burial place and preparation of boiled grain of wheat and chickpeas customarily served to the *edir* members after burial at the shelter of the bereaved.

According to some of my respondents, some members of the non-displaced community in the vicinity visit the bereaved and contribute to the cause. The displaced, in return, also pay a visit to the bereaved of the non-displaced community, a process that serves as a contact point for both the displaced and non-displaced communities.

Ekub is the other form of community-based institution where members regularly contribute a small amount of money to a common fund, which is then distributed to the members in rotation, or when a particular need arises. According to this study the majority of the participant of *ekub* are the young members of the community between the ages of 6 and 25 who save from their meager daily income. They usually meet in the evenings at local tearooms owned by the non-displaced community and keep the collected money with the same nearby shopkeepers, which plays the role of fostering mutual trust and hence social integration between the host and the displaced communities.

III. Sport Clubs as Integrators

In his opening remark to the Olympic Aid Forum on February 9, 2002, the UN secretary General, Kofi Annan remarked:

> We have seen examples of how sport can build self-esteem, leadership skill, community spirit, and bridges across ethnic or communal divides. We have seen how it can channel energies away from aggression or self-destruction, and into learning and self-motivation (UNICEF, 2002: 31).

Most of the teenagers in the displaced community are participating in a sports club established in the vicinity by an NGO called *Young Life* that has put up sports facilities and fields for both indoor and outdoor activities since January 2001. According to the 02 kebele officials who supervise the activities, more than 200 young people come to the center every week, a number that largely comprises the displaced persons. Young people other than the displaced in the Wereda also use the facility and have regular matches with the displaced persons' sports teams. This, the kebele officials explained, has reduced significantly the tension and occasional conflict between the young peoples of the displaced and the host communities.

SOCIAL CONFLICTS IN THE DISPLACED PEOPLE SITUATION

I. Types of Conflicts Prevalent in the Displaced Persons' Community

On the basis of information gathered from respondents and the 02 kebele officials, the commonest types of conflicts apparent among the displaced can be categorized into three: intra-household conflicts, inter-household conflict and intercommunity conflicts.

1. *Intra-household conflicts*

This is the commonest type of conflict in the displaced community constituting forty-one percent of the all types of conflicts. The major ones here are between grown-up children and parents, between spouses, among adult members of the family and between a single parent and a cohabiter. Such conflicts escalated to the extent of manslaughter where an instance of a husband killing his own wife is recorded. These conflicts usually emanate from such varied cases as indiscreetness on financial issues where children hide some of their income from parents, disloyalty of spouses to their partners and misbehavior of grown-up children.

Such conflicts have resulted in divorce, family disintegration, mental illness, and children evacuating home for the street and hence escalation of juvenile delinquency, streetism, prostitution and other kinds of social anomie.

2. *Inter-household conflicts*

These are conflicts that usually occur among households in the displaced communities, commonly neighbors. Their occurrence, which is 25%, is relatively less compared to the other types of conflicts. Competition for space for an outdoor kitchen, garbage disposal and offences against ones children by grown up members of the neighboring household are some of the major causes for such conflicts.

3. *Inter-community conflict*

Inter-community conflicts are conflicts that occur between members of the displaced persons and the host community. Such conflicts usually occur in groups where the young members of the displaced community fight with a group of young people in the same kebele or other kebeles. These conflicts usually begin at a sport field where football teams from the respective communities play a match or at public schools where children of the same community go. These conflicts have various causes, the major areas being economic and behavioral incompatibilities between members of the two communities.

II. Dispute Settlement and Conflict Resolution within the Displaced Persons' Community

Among the displaced persons, a dispute does not generally involve serious institutional problems, and it can be handled through bargaining or arbitration. People can disagree on income, kitchen space and other matters in ordinary social space. This type of problem occurring in a normal relationship can be settled by finding compromise solutions. According to information from a focus

group discussion with the administrative committee of the displaced persons, the community utilizes two major types of conflict resolution practices: The first and commonest being mediation by elderly people from the displaced persons' community and who are recognized for their experience and skill in this regard particularly for the first two kinds of conflicts. The other is through an institution which has come to be known as *stetita tibka* [Amharic for security force] that consists of all the able-bodied male and female members of the community who patrol the settlement on a regular basis day and night in turn. The *stetita tibeka,* among other duties has the responsibility of checking on the peace and security of the neighborhoods, maintaining order and summoning the *woreda* police in situations beyond its capacity. According to the above mentioned group of respondents, there were frequent instances of inter-community conflict that demanded the intervention of the police force, who detained the dissenters.

CONCLUSION

   The characterization of socio-cultural displacement as a condition of disintegration does not imply that the displaced are unable to give meaning to their existence and suffering, as the capacity to draw on social or religious ideals, and on co-operative effort and solidarity, can bolster psychological and physical defense in even the most extreme situations. Nevertheless, their coping responses mask uncertainty, anxiety, and stress; the most important social control mechanism is not internalized values and norms but the threat of the superior power (be it the central or local government authorities).

   The rapid social change experienced by the displaced is becoming a process of alienation from cultural roots that give symbolic meaning to existence and exercise social control and interaction. Undoubtedly, such an abstraction has social revolutionary potential; but without conducive socioeconomic conditions, the consequences may instead be antirevolutionary and counterproductive.

   Averting the destructive potential of displacement requires a strategy that entails more than evacuation as attempted a couple of times by the government. First, rehabilitation of the war displaced must be planned and implemented. Second, the strategy for rehabilitation should consider the country's socioeconomic reality. The rehabilitation strategy must be sensitive to the processes operating in the Ethiopians' social formation and include a comprehensive plan to release the developmental potential of small producers.

ethnic background, etc. The leadership committee for the displaced persons in Mekanissa has also made available the statistical records at its disposal.

NOTES

(1)   Amharic word referring to uprooted persons and assumedly coined during the Ethio-Somali war in 1976-1977.
(2)   Asmeret Haile, a widow in the Mekanissa-Qorre camp was a resident in Asmara for 25 years until the time the war forced who to leave her home with her three children on May 26, 1991.
(3)   Tibereh Zewdi, 43, had been in Asmara for 25 years. She had six children out of which 2 died during the period of flight at Adigrat.
(4)   Fiyeri Ayalew, 15, has three brothers and four sisters and helps her widowed mother and the family by doing all the domestic labor work including the fetching of water, traversing 500 m two or three times a day from one of the residents in the neighborhood who sells it at 5 cents a gallon.

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