

## **Development and (Un)happiness: A case study from rural Ethiopia**

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### **Introduction**

This paper presents an ethnographic case study of the impact of a 'successful' development project on a small rural community in Southern Ethiopia. The project, carried out by a well known international NGO, aimed to increase household income in this remote area by developing the production and sale of a cash crop, namely apples, in this area formerly characterised by subsistence agriculture. Viewed from the outside, through the lens of traditional development indicators, the project is a huge success. However, when viewed from the inside, by living in the community and observing the social and cultural changes that have come about because of apple cultivation, the success appears much more qualified. Although additional wealth has been generated, it is questionable whether this wealth has made people happier - it has largely been used to buy more clothes and plastic goods, such as plates, cups and shoes. More worryingly, the new presence of a valuable commodity - the apple saplings and trees - has led to widespread theft and social conflict. Traditional methods of conflict resolution are proving ineffectual in this new social reality. Trust has been eroded and what can be described as 'social breakdown' is taking place. The result is that people are clearly more stressed and unhappy. None of this is captured by traditional development indicators, and even by more holistic indicators of wellbeing would only capture the problems after they had occurred. The paper considers the trade-offs between wellbeing in different domains of life and questions how development organisations should deal with the seemingly

inevitable trade-off between economic development and community vitality. The paper signals the importance of ethnographic accounts of development and happiness in order to understand the real impact of development on people's lives.

### **The Gamo highlands**

The Gamo Highlands are a mountainous area in southwest Ethiopia. The village of Masho, where I conducted my research, is situated at an altitude of about 10,000 feet, whilst the highest peaks extend up to 14,000 feet. The population of the Gamo Highlands was approximately 700,000 when the last national census was conducted in 1994 (Population and Housing Census 1994: 14), and is probably considerably more now. Masho itself has a population of approximately 2,000 people. Population density is high, estimated at about 336 persons per square kilometre. There are only a few dirt roads in the highlands and most travel is done by foot or mule. People live in traditional bamboo houses - looking rather like an upturned basket - or in newer style rectangular mud houses with corrugated iron roofs. Two or three generations live together in small compounds that are usually surrounded with simple bamboo fences. Villages do not have electricity or running water - cooking is done over wood fires and lighting is provided by small kerosene burners and candles.

People have traditionally lived by subsistence agriculture, cultivating wheat and barley, and to a lesser extent peas, beans, potatoes and tree cabbage. Enset, the false banana plant, is also central to subsistence. During the twentieth century people have also been involved in hand-loom weaving, becoming one of the major producers of the traditional white cloth shawls worn by men and women all over Ethiopia. The gendered division of labour is such that men are responsible for ploughing the land, sowing seed, weaving and house-building, while women are

responsible for taking manure to the fields, harvesting, fetching water, food preparation and child care.

Whilst life is physically tough and people live in poverty according to international standards, this is not a famine area, people do not go hungry and until people began to become aware of living standards in larger towns, Addis Abeba and the West (as seen on television and in the lives of foreign tourists and missionaries), people did not consider themselves to be poor. However, as development comes to this area this perception is beginning to change.

What these bare descriptions and statistics do not show is the remarkable social and cultural richness that has long been a part of Gamo life. According to the Gamo worldview there are numerous spirits living in the surrounding environment - they are to be found in the earth, in lakes, on mountain tops, in sacred forests, in large rocks and so on. They are thought to have great powers over agricultural production and human well-being (Freeman 2002:66). If fed through offerings and sacrifices, the spirits are believed to cause the crops to grow, the cows to give milk and the women to have babies. In short they will cause the people who 'feed' them to become fertile and prosperous. However, if these spirits are ignored and the required offerings are not made then they are believed to cause crop failure, sickness and conflicts. Feeding the spirits then, in traditional Gamo thought, is crucial to living and maintaining a good life.

According to the set of beliefs and practices that I will call the sacrificial system, however, not everyone can make offerings to the spirits for themselves. Certain senior people, such as clan heads, lineage heads and household heads (all male) must make the offerings on behalf of their juniors. The sacrificial system, therefore, is essentially a pyramidal power structure with a senior, at the top who sacrifices animals to the spirits on behalf of the whole community and various other 'seniors' who make similar

sacrifices on behalf of their district, clan, lineage and sub-lineage, right down to the household head, or father, who makes sacrifices on behalf of his household. In each case those on whose behalf the sacrifice or offering is being made have to 'call' the senior to make the sacrifice or offering. This 'calling' always involves some type of economic transaction, such as giving the senior a sheep or some grain so that he will come and perform his task.

It can thus be seen that seniors are considered to mediate the important relation between their juniors and the spirits, and thus in a subtle sense, to control the wellbeing of their juniors. The hierarchical social relations constructed in Masho, and other Gamo communities, can be thought of a set of channels down which fertility and wellbeing flow, from senior to junior. By following the social norms and behaving the appropriate way to one's seniors, the social gradient is set up that enables the downward flow of fertility and wellbeing. Conversely, if one does not follow the rules or behaves inappropriately, it is as if either the gradient has been flattened or there is a blockage in the channel and the flow of fertility and wellbeing is hampered. In such circumstances those downstream of the obstruction would expect to experience agricultural failures, sickness or other misfortune. This state of blockage in the system of flow is known as *gome*, a term which refers to both the initial transgression and the misfortune that follows (Freeman 2002; Sperber 1980). Thus when a person experiences some misfortune they will immediately try to work out what rule they have broken or to which senior they have behaved inappropriately, and will seek to make amends. And in order to avoid misfortune in the first place, people in Masho have traditionally focussed much attention on proper behaviour and avoiding *gome*. Thus major social conflict, violence and theft have been rare in traditional Gamo communities.

Another important part of Gamo life is the initiatory system. This is a politico-ritual process by which men, with their wives or mothers, become initiated to the status of *halak'a* or elder. It is not

however dependent on age, but rather on material success. Any man can be initiated to the role of *halak'a* if he can raise the requisite resources needed to host the huge feasts which are a necessary part of the initiation process. The initiation process lasts several months, sometimes years, and involves numerous feasts and rituals (Freeman 2002: 83-113). A major function of the initiatory system, therefore, is as a system of economic redistribution (Halperin & Olmstead 1976). Put another way, the initiatory system provides something for people to do with their surplus wealth. In a traditional economy with no consumer goods, people use their surplus wealth to buy status.

A final important aspect of traditional Gamo life is the system of assemblies that permeate all communities. Formal communal assemblies, meeting in assigned assembly places, often with ritual significance, used to be the locus of legal and political life in Masho and other Gamo communities. Whilst much of their role has now been taken over by state political and legal modalities, the assemblies continue to play an important role in Masho life. The community meets here to discuss serious matters, to plan communal activities and to settle disputes. People speak one at a time and discussion continues until consensus is reached. In the past the assemblies had recourse to strong sanctions, such as fines and expatriation, and they provided an extremely effective way to settle disputes.

Along with this set of traditional beliefs and practices, many men and women in Masho would also consider themselves to be Orthodox Christians, and would occasionally visit one of the local churches or make special offerings to Maryam (Mary) or one of the saints. Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity has been present in the Gamo Highlands since the sixteenth century and has mixed easily with the local traditional beliefs.

Whilst there has been much change in the details of traditional Gamo life throughout the twentieth century, as I have discussed

elsewhere (Freeman 2002), the three central elements of traditional Gamo culture that I have described here have been central in Masho life up until the late 1990s. At that point, Protestant missionaries came to the area and began to be successful at converting people to Protestant Christianity.

The Protestant missionaries consider the spirits to be the devil, and thus see all traditional practices as forms of devil worship. They consider *gome* to be backward superstition, the *halak'a* initiations a waste of money, and all other traditions evil or irrelevant. The conversion process thus involves convincing local people to give up their traditional ways and take on the new ways of Christianity. Protestants focus more on individual than community, equality than hierarchy, and personal consumption rather than communal redistribution.

In light of the activities of the Protestants, the leaders of the Orthodox Church began to feel the need to separate out their form of Christianity into a distinct religious offering so that they could compete for the hearts and minds of the Masho people as they 'become modern'. Thus the Orthodox Church is now also turning against the traditional practices and putting pressure on its followers to stop them and solely follow the teachings of Orthodoxy.

The conversion process is still very much taking place and there is much religious flux in contemporary Masho, with many individuals moving backwards and forwards between traditional, Orthodox and Protestant lives as they make up their minds. In 2005 approximately 65% of the community had become Protestants, 25% were Orthodox Christians and about 10% were traditional.

It was in this context that the first NGO came to the area and started to implement development projects to try to improve the lives of the local people.

### **Development in Ethiopia**

Ethiopia is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world, ranking 169th out of 177 countries with data in the Human Development Index (HDI) for 2007/08. Poverty levels are desperate with 31 million people living below the national poverty line of less than half a dollar a day, and over 80% of its 84 million people living below the international poverty line of \$2 a day. Lack of food security and malnutrition are major problems where between 6 and 13 million people are at risk of starvation each year.

Poverty is manifest in many forms, but most directly by low levels of income. In 2000, the World Bank estimated *per capita* income to be 100 USD. Perhaps the most telling manifestation of poverty in Ethiopia is the extent of food insecurity that prevails among the population. The annual number of drought-affected and internally displaced (due to armed conflicts) people requiring emergency food assistance has ranged between 1.1 million and 10.9 million over the past ten years. In 2004 Ethiopia ranked 105 out of 108 developing countries in the Human Poverty Index with an HPI value of 54.9, indicating extreme poverty. The Human Development Index (HDI) for 2005 was 0.406, further confirming extremely low levels of human development and extensive poverty.

It is thus not surprising that there are over 700 NGOs working in Ethiopia and that the main focus for many of them is poverty reduction and food security. DEVCO (not its real name) is one of these NGOs. DEVCO has been working in Ethiopia since 1971 and now works in many areas of the country. In the late 1990s DEVCO started working with a number of villages in Chencha district, including Masho. Prior to this there had been virtually no NGOs active in the area, partly because of the lack of famine and extreme poverty in this area and partly because of the difficult access due to hilly terrain and near to non-existent roads.

### **The DEVCO development project in Masho**

DEVCO set up a wide-ranging development program in the local area. As set out in the initial program document the overall goal of the program was to 'contribute towards sustainable household food security' and the three substantive objectives were:

1. Improved agricultural production
2. Improved socio-economic infrastructures
3. Increase in household income.

The program document discusses the economic situation in the area and gives data on average land holdings, agricultural crops grown, numbers of livestock per head, off-farm activities, levels of literacy, rates of malnutrition, number of female-headed households and the like. Only passing reference is made to 'culture' or 'traditional practices' and there is no discussion of the social life of the community. I would never recognise the vibrant village that I lived in for two years from their bare situation analysis. There are no people in this document, only statistics. Development for DEVCO is a purely material, economic matter. How people think, feel or conceptualise their own wellbeing is totally ignored.

For DEVCO development 'is a process of change for human beings for the better.' What 'better' actually means, however, is never discussed. Like most development organisations, DEVCO is trying to improve peoples' lives without having any clear idea of what a 'good life' is or what actually makes people happy. And although DEVCO proclaims a 'holistic development' philosophy including physical, material, economic and spiritual development, it seems that all non-material development is only relevant as far as it serves material development. Thus their program document declares that

real development begins when people begin to think differently, when they realise the potentials their environment could offer and the means available to tap the potentials of their physical and social environments. (p. 52)

In other words, development includes changing the way people think so that they will learn how to maximise the material gain they can achieve from their physical and social environment. Development involves turning traditional peoples into economic maximisers. Will this really improve their lives?

One activity within this program, and the one that I shall focus on in the rest of this paper, was the introduction of apple cultivation. Apples, it was considered, would grow well in the highland soils and could function as a cash crop. The farmers could sell the apples to consumers in Addis Abeba for a relatively high price, thus improving their household income.

DEVCO staff selected a number of individuals and gave them each six apple saplings for a nominal price. They trained them on cultivation techniques and provided follow up support to help them grow and propagate. They also supplied root stock to selected farmers in the area and made available more apple saplings for general purchase.

The project has continued for several years, and more and more farmers have become involved in it. From a technical point of view it is very successful. The farmers have quickly learnt the new cultivation techniques and the apples have grown well in the local soil. The total apple production is still relatively low as it takes several years for apple saplings to grow large enough to bear fruit, but already it seems that the fruit quality is good and a small local trade is developing. Trade in the apple saplings themselves has also developed, with one apple sapling selling at about 50 birr (about US\$ 5). Considering that a day's labour is valued at about 3 birr, this is a very high price.

Most households in Masho now cultivate at least some apples. Some now have considerable orchards, while others have just a few saplings. The community as a whole also contributed money and bought saplings for a community orchard. Masho, along with surrounding villages, is now known as the area for apples.

### **Impacts of the project**

So what has been the impact of this project? Has it improved people's lives? Has it made people happier? The project approached development from an economic point of view and it seems clear that apple cultivation has indeed lead to improvement in household income for many households. Through the sale of apples and apple saplings additional income has come to many households. DEVCO and other organisations stop the analysis there and conclude that the project has been a huge success. Already plans are underway to implement it in other parts of the country. But if we look a little closer we begin to see another story.

Firstly there is the question of what people do with their additional household income. The development project focuses on generating this income and then seems to assume that people will use this extra money in a way that betters their lives. Little thought has been given to what this actually means. In practice, what I saw in Masho was a proliferation of plastic household items – plates, jugs and washing-up bowls. More people are wearing plastic shoes rather than going barefoot and people have more changes of clothes.

When I discussed their expenditure with people, most reported that when they received a large lump sum, they wanted to get rid of it as quickly as possible. People did not want to keep the money for day to day activities, but wanted to spend it quickly on large or important items. Thus one man reported how he had quickly spent the income from the sale of some apple saplings by buying a calf and new clothes for all his family. A few days earlier he had asked me for money to buy medicine from the clinic because his

daughter was sick and he had no cash. Other people told similar stories – they did not want the money to disappear on small things so they spent it quickly on big things, and then found themselves in the familiar old situation when a child needed a school book or a family member required medicine.

Secondly, and more importantly, is the unintended impact of the apple project. In short it has led to almost total social breakdown. The problem is theft. People who planted their apple saplings in a regular plot of agricultural land, away from their homestead, often arrived one day to find their entire holding of apple saplings had been uprooted and taken. People say that neighbours steal from neighbours, brothers steal from brothers. The problem has become so intense that nowadays no-one plants apple saplings in regular agricultural plots, which are unfenced and unguarded. Instead people have started to plant the apple saplings within their homesteads, on small pieces of land that would otherwise be the location of a cooking hut, or a space to hang drying washing, or a space where people might sit and talk. Traditionally agricultural land and domestic space is clearly marked. In order to protect their apple saplings from theft this boundary has become blurred.

Others have created fenced orchards and try to guard them, but everywhere the fear of theft is high.

And even so, theft persists. It is not hard to break through the simple bamboo fences that mark off family compounds and break-ins in the middle of the night have now become frequent. Many households have now bought dogs so as to protect their compounds from unwanted guests. In the family that I live with, and no doubt many others, the young man of the house grabs a few hours sleep during the evening so that he can stay awake all night, guarding his apple saplings. This spoils the camaraderie around the evening meal, as an important family member is not there, and often leaves him tired and irritable from not enough sleep. The impact on his marital relations is not good either.

Masho, like other Gamo communities, has always been a sociable place. Friends, neighbours and kin are always going in and out of each other's compounds, helping with tasks, participating in meetings, and sharing news and gossip. Now this has changed. People don't want to go into too many compounds, in case they are accused of stealing. And when unusual visitors do come, household members notice where they look and whether their eyes stray towards the apple saplings. There is the thought that perhaps they may be checking out the lay of the land before coming back at night to steal the valuable saplings.

While many people seem to get away with the thefts, occasionally someone is caught. About a year ago a Masho man was caught after he stole 2000 birr (US\$ 200) worth of apple saplings from the community orchard. People were outraged. The man was put in prison in the local town of Chench. He claimed to have already sold the saplings and disbursed the money and was thus unable to repay the community straight away. The case continues although the man is now back home. People are angry and social relations are tense. Trust, the glue of social cohesion, has almost entirely been eroded.

Why has this happened? It is, I claim, because of the unfortunate combination of the activities of DEVCO and the activities of Protestant missionaries. DEVCO have introduced a very valuable commodity into the village economy, and the activities of the missionaries have led to erosion of traditional values and practices and to a state of moral and cultural relativism. Apple saplings are worth a huge amount of money. Stealing 20 apple saplings can earn you 1,000 birr (US\$ 100), which is the average annual per capita income in Ethiopia. When there is no clear moral message about right and wrong, and no moral centre able to impose sanctions, plus an extremely valuable commodity, the temptation has become too great and people have begun to steal on an unprecedented scale.

Were the traditional Gamo culture still strong, people would be scared of causing *gome*. Even if they felt tempted to steal the precious saplings they would fear the misfortune that would likely occur to them by angering the spirits in this way. Nowadays people are not sure whether the spirits exist or not, or whether Christian ideas about punishment in hell are true or false. The plurality of ideas and religions has led to a state of moral relativism where there is space to think that since they can't all be right then maybe none of them are right. The Protestants, now the largest group, are still busy trying to evangelise the rest of the community, and thus their sermons are not preaching Christian values, which would include not stealing, but are instead exhorting people to leave their traditional ways and come to the Church. They are saying that other ways are wrong, but are not spending much time teaching what they believe to be right.

**So are people happier?**

It is difficult for me to believe that people are happier now than before the DEVCO project started. Unfortunately I do not have survey data about people's subjective wellbeing, but I have a sense of a community that I have known over some twelve years. Whilst people do appreciate the additional wealth and the new clothes and plastic shoes that it buys, people overall seem more stressed and more fearful. There is less socialising and visiting and more of a wariness of others. People are forever talking about recent thefts and complaining how people can behave this way. There is a growing sense that individuals and families are trying to protect their possessions from others. Boundaries are becoming more clearly marked, the sense of community is slowly diminishing. On balance, it would seem to me that people are less happy now than they were twelve years ago, before the apples and the missionaries arrived.

DEVCO however are unaware of the social impact of their apple project, as they are only looking at economic factors and do not

really have any deep understanding of the local people and their lives, beliefs and culture. When looking through the lens of economy these other matters become invisible or irrelevant.

Were DEVCO using the GNH indicators developed in Bhutan, or other indicators of wellbeing, then it seems likely that they would have at least spotted the problem once it occurred. The community vitality indicators would surely have shown the breakdown that has taken place. Thus it seems that using wellbeing or GNH indicators is a big step forward from using simple economic indicators alone.

Two interesting questions remain, however.

1. If DEVCO had designed the project with the GNH indicators in mind, would they have foreseen the problem and been able to design their project in a way to minimise the problem of theft?
2. In measuring happiness, how does one value comparatively happiness in different domains? If people are happier because they have greater wealth, but less happy because there is less community vitality, how do we weigh these different types of happiness against each other? Has overall happiness got better, worse or stayed about the same?

The answer to the first question, I believe, is no. Although the broader thinking that a GNH approach would have brought, it is simply impossible to predict the particular nuances of social change, and even with in-depth knowledge of this community it is still totally surprising that theft would become such a huge problem and that social relations would breakdown to such an extent.

However, if the project were carefully monitoring GNH indicators throughout the duration of the project, then it does seem likely that the project staff would have been alerted to the problem at its early stages. They would then have been able to discuss the matter

with community members and, before the problem escalated to such a huge extent, work with the community to find some solutions.

Possible solutions might include asking all the religious authorities in the area – Protestant, Orthodox and Traditional – to actively teach about the importance of trust and honesty and the evil of theft. They might also include setting up some kind of local community police force with the task of patrolling the area at night and guarding the orchards. Other solutions could include trying to control the market of apple saplings so that it was impossible for people who had stolen apple saplings to sell them, or setting up a tagging system so that all saplings were tagged with information about their owner and location. It is possible that a combination of these activities would solve, or at least control, the social problems that have come about because of the project.

The second question is perhaps more philosophical. Even the proposed solution to the problem are only a band-aid, covering up a fundamental change in mentality and outlook that is taking place in the community - a change from a more communal outlook to a more individualist outlook. It seems that the most productive and efficient economic systems stress the pursuit of individual economic gain and the rewards of individual economic consumption. The desire for material things, commodities, is the fuel driving this kind of economic development. And it seems that the development of an economic system that stresses individual (or family) production and individual (or family) consumption necessarily brings about a shift from communal to individualist values. So there appears to be an inevitable trade-off between economic wealth on the one hand and community vitality on the other hand.

Further research is needed to understand people's subjective experience of this transition and this trade-off. We need to understand how people themselves value the different domains

and well-being, to what extent they are willing to trade one for another, and where in the continuum between the two end-points they would choose to be. Perhaps our responsibility as development practitioners and policy makers is to help individuals and communities to become aware of these issues and to empower them to be able to make their own decisions, rather than have them caught in a situation that they feel is beyond their control.

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