

## Q & A with Anduamlak Meharie

### 1) Why did the topic of urban expansion and population displacement in Ethiopia interest you so much?

As an Ethiopian immigrant and part of a larger diasporan 'community' in the US, I have always been fascinated by population movements through space and over-time. I have been interested in the various ways in which different people respond to their new environments and situation since I left my home country and joined my brothers and sisters in the US to pursue my education. The ways in which younger individuals respond to new opportunities and constraints they encounter in a new setting or situation is especially of great interest to me. Perhaps this particular interest is initially shaped by my own experience as a sixteen years old immigrant. As an anthropology student at the University of North Texas, I had initially planned on doing my masters research on Ethiopian diaspora in the US by comparing how second generation Ethiopian-American youth in two Ethiopian communities (one in the greater Dallas area and the other in San Jose, California) negotiate and construct their identities. However, I decided, to pursue a more applied track and received my masters in Applied Anthropology, Program Evaluation. This is because I have also wanted my education to have direct applicability to everyday issues/problems (i.e., project assessment/design). I also believed that I could always pursue my research interest in diaspora after I received my doctorate and a bit of work experience. I decided on UK because of its reputation as one of the best applied Anthropology program in the nation, its specialization in development studies, and faculty research interest in East Africa. Once in UK, I wanted to combine my earlier interest in population movements and development anthropology. After some literature research I decided that the issue of development-induced displacement provided me with the opportunity to do just that.

I received a little bit of funding to conduct a preliminary research in Ethiopia in the summer of 2004. My plan was to find an appropriate site for my research in the rural areas. According to my personal knowledge and literature review most of development-induced displacements took place as a result of government led resettlement schemes, resettling people from draught stricken areas to what the government believes to be more 'fertile' areas. However, once I arrived in the capital city (Addis Ababa) to talk with professors at the university in order to identify potential research sites, I was told that the government is very sensitive about its resettlement schemes and does not allow researchers permission/access in those areas. Moreover, and more importantly, once in the city I was overwhelmed by the level of construction (roads, buildings, real estate, ect...) taking place, practically everywhere I looked. I also discovered that the city was expanding very rapidly and it was doing so at the expense of peri-urban farmers located on the outskirts of the city.

I realized that urban displacement was something that has been neglected from displacement studies, particularly in Africa. Since, currently, Africa is the fastest urbanizing region in the world, research focusing on urbanization in general and displacement associated with urban renewal and expansion in particular was much needed and would fill a void in the literature.

## 2) Why are you focusing on 15-24 year olds?

I focus on youth (approximately 15-24 years old) for a number of reasons. The main reason is because previous displacement research have focused on the community or the household as a whole, and have neglected to focus their research on particular segments of displaced populations, although women have perhaps received the majority of attention along these lines. However, youth, as a social category, has not received the same level of inquiry. While displacement studies have documented some impacts on young people, attention has been sporadic and too often secondary. Youth may be discussed in relation to intrahousehold conflict over compensation money associated with displacement but rarely is there careful attention to their agency. The control of compensation money by elders often creates strong tensions between household members, especially between fathers and sons. At the same time, youth are often well positioned to take advantage of new opportunities created by development projects and in some cases escape from generational and other social controls. However, the impact of youths' coping and adaptive strategies on intrahousehold relationships and household livelihood security in these situations has yet to be explored in great detail. In the case of peri-urban displacement, the possibility of preserving 'cultivation' as the main source of livelihood decreases with rapid urbanization (urban expansion) in developing countries. As peasant populations are increasingly displaced, youth with minimal literacy skills and a capacity to do manual labor can actually play a decisive factor in supplementing household income and thus contributing to household livelihood security near urban centers. The post-displacement environment with a new set of opportunities and constraints raises critical questions regarding how youth are affected by this type of displacement, as well as the various mechanisms they utilize to cope with it. The analysis, however, has to extend beyond the impact of displacement on youth. Youth cannot be isolated from their households and communities, as well as from larger social, economic and political formations, and social movements.

I also wanted to look at the longer term impacts of displacement and the best way to do that is to actually look at the next generation of stakeholders, which are the youth.

## 3) When did you get there? How long will you stay?

I arrived in Addis Ababa at the end of July, 2005 and my plan is to stay here until beginning of August 2006. If I don't feel that I have all the relevant data necessary for my dissertation I will prolong my fieldwork until December.

I was fortunate to receive two grants, one from the National Science Foundation and the other from Wenner-Gren. The two grants are and will enable me to conduct my research to the best of my ability.

4) Are you staying with family? If not, what are your living arrangements?

I am currently staying with my mother in Addis Ababa and I take care of some of expenses.

5) Can the current government force people to sell their peri-urban farms for urban housing?

What are the politics of this?

Yes the government can evict people from their land and compensate them for it, although compensation is very minimal and inadequate. Ethiopia's current land-tenure policy puts all land under the control of the government (article 40 [3] of the constitution of the Federal Government of Ethiopia), therefore, the displaced have little or no right to refuse their removal from their agricultural land and/or housing. I should also add that it is not only the peri-urban farmers who are being displaced. As a result of inner-city renewal there are thousands of people who have been relocated to the periphery of the city, far from their source of livelihoods.

6) What are your research findings so far?

This is a little hard to answer, mostly because there are so many findings. Let me just list some of them, which is by no means exclusive.

1) Changes in age at marriage is evident as young men do not have land or enough wealth to obtain a wife. 2) there are sustained familial conflicts as a result of compensation money as it often comes up during arguments between young adults and their parents (especially fathers). 3) For households who have lost their residential housing and were given clustered plots for resettlement, there are problems of water shortages for cattle and grazing land (as most purchase feed for their cattle). While previously individual households had enough land to graze their cattle and used to dig holes to collect water for their cattle this practice is becoming increasingly difficult for households settled so close together. 4) More households send their kids to school, often 5-8 km away, now they realize they cannot continue farming and wouldn't have much to pass as inheritance and farming as a livelihood is increasingly threatened by urban expansion. 5) Debbo (mutual work group) has decreased in the area. Those who still practice it claim that households are no longer able to provide a feast for the work party as they used to. Furthermore, the potential pool of participants has decreased as more individuals get involved in off-farm activities and no longer available as they used to. 6) Most households have finished the compensation money. This is particularly the case with households who have lost their residential plots. While they were given replacement land, the plots they were provided is within the boundary of the real estate company that has displaced them, therefore, they were told to build

houses that are considered modern (i.e., cement, brick or cinder blocks, corrugated roofs, etc...). 7) since land belongs to the government compensation is calculated for only what a person can/has produced on that land, not the value of the land itself. The calculation therefore considers the income that can be gained from the sell of the harvest. However, the grain prices used for the calculation is based on prices that are ten years old, it does not consider current market prices (which in some cases have shown a 30% increase).

#### 7) What's the most difficult thing about doing the work you do?

Since my main sources of data are two, my difficulties are also two pronged.

The first is related to the farmers. Some community members have gotten to the point where they are not willing to cooperate with researchers anymore because a couple of students have conducted their research in the area previously and they haven't seen any improvements in their living condition. Furthermore, they don't see the benefit of any research for them, since they already have been displaced. The argument that the research results may help other peri-urban farming communities, who will be displaced in the future, doesn't seem to hold much weight with them. There is also a reluctance of individuals to reveal the amount and source of income for their households. This is perhaps one of the most difficult aspect of the research thus far and could potentially be affect the survey I plan to conduct in a couple of months (quantitative aspect of my research).

The second is concerning the government itself and relevant government offices. The continuing political instability in the country, particularly in Addis Ababa, has further complicated the research and obtaining relevant information from government offices has become harder in the process. Addis Ababa City Administration (an institution which can potentially be helpful in providing most relevant data on urban development and expansion in the city) currently only has a transitional government in place until a permanent government can takeover. The party members that were publicly elected are currently in jail waiting trail for unlawfully attempting to overthrow the government. The temporary nature of the city administration also entails too many official meetings (not available for interviews), increasing amount of work as citizens attempt to finalize various pending cases (permission letters take a long time), and reluctance on the part of city officials from doing or saying anything that might possibly incriminate them until/when a permanent administration is established. Furthermore, government offices are frequently dismantled, merged, and newly created. The fluidity of such structures coupled with high turnover rate of those in charge makes it difficult to obtain most relevant documents.

#### 8) What is the most rewarding thing about doing the work you do?

The fact that my research can potentially bring changes for the better is the most rewarding aspect of this research. However, this all depends on the willingness of the government to

actually listen to what people like me (researchers) have to say. Some of the displaced are also very willing to tell their story and have it documented. They are often marginalized and the fact that there are some people who are willing to listen to them makes them happy. Moreover, the fact that I am doing a research in my own country and I can potentially contribute to its well-being gives me more pleasure than almost anything else. Lastly, in the midst of all the political instability and unpopular governance, the fact that I am able to find so many city government employees of various ranks who are willing to help me with my research and who seem genuinely concerned (although without power to be able to do much about it) for the well-being of those who they administer gives me hope for the future of the country (although most of them feel they are caught between a rock and a hard place).

#### 9) How do you go about doing your research?

My research is generally three-fold, although not equally weighed. The main sources of my primary data are the farmers themselves. I spend most of my time with them; informal conversations, formal interview, survey, or just hanging out and helping them with whatever they are working on at the time of my visit. I also interview several officials at various levels of city government, in matters of land administration, displacement and compensation, peasant associations, urban development, youth associations, etc... Lastly, I conduct archival/document research at various libraries, i.e., at the Addis Ababa University libraries as well as government libraries.

#### 10) How has Peter Little helped you in this work, or as a student at UK?

As a graduate student in anthropology, I have acquired a solid education in the socioeconomic and cultural implications of development under Dr. Peter D. Little and other faculty at the University of Kentucky. As my committee advisor Dr. Little's has been very helpful in giving me feedback during my coursework, grant proposal writing, and now during my fieldwork. He is one of the well known scholars in development anthropology and his insights and direction has been crucial in my development as a graduate student in anthropology in general. I do, however, should emphasize that other faculty members in the department at UK and the University of North Texas also deserve credit for guiding me until this point in my educational career. I would like to express my gratitude to all my professors who have supported and encouraged me this far and I hope will do so in the future.