

THE NEED FOR PARADIGM CHANGE - III

By G. E. Gorfu

The hot issue these days is on grabbing African land, where countries like Arabia, Korea, China and others are accused of Neocolonialism for their going in as investors only to grab agricultural land and grow food for export back to their home countries. Land is a special case and unlike other assets and commodities, should be seen in a totally different light. Land is sacred because it is secured by the precious blood of our past and present patriots. There is no alternative to land.

Having said that, there is nothing wrong if foreign investors cultivate land, except that they are exporting food from poor countries to feed the rich countries! That is the rub. Worse still, these foreign investors, except for making some vague promises of creating jobs to cut unemployment, do not seem to give back even a fraction of what they stand to gain. This is the reason why this has been seen as the Neocolonialism of Africa. And land grabbing is going on at a steady pace.

Land should not be left fallow, so it is only reasonable to sublet land to investors that grow food. It is also true, poor local farmers who may only own an ox or two cannot compete with modern agricultural investors who may come with tractors, harvesters, and various kinds of mechanized equipment to work the land. Even though Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular, should let agricultural investors grow food, the problem is in the exchange rate between the one giving land and the one farming the land. There seems to be no equivalence in value exchange here.

In traditional Ethiopia we had the “Feudal” practice of: ‘Ye siso gebere’, ‘Ye rub gebere’, etc., (farmer of a third, farmer of a quarter) where those who did not own land still farmed, but gave back to the landowner anywhere from two thirds up to three quarters of their produce. We can now see how the “Feudal” system would have benefited us far better than the present set up where investors give only a pittance of what they produce and take the lions share home.

So, a paradigm change is needed here. First of all, though I am not advocating to go back to the feudal system, the inequities here are clear, and we should admit that our “Feudal” ancestors often had some good ideas and that there was wisdom in some of their methods. The Ethiopian Government should then move forward to demand a fair portion of the produce to be reserved for the home market by limiting the amount investors can export. What is a fair amount? We think it is reasonable to reserve at least 50% of their produce to be kept for the home market.

Furthermore, a five or a ten year time limit should be set as a standard on any agreement entered into with foreign agricultural investors, unlike the 99 year land lease given to native Ethiopian farmers. That would enable the contracts to be reviewed and adjusted as often as necessary.

Another hot topic of the day is the recent interview of PM Meles Zenawi and his wish to step down. This is not the first time the PM expressed this wish, and it is a great decision. It will usher in a new era in Ethiopian politics. When PM Meles Zenawi steps down, it will cement his name in the annals of Ethiopian history in indelible ink of gold. The ruling EPRDF party will now need to start looking carefully for a new leader, train, test, and install him/her into office.

This will be something new for Ethiopia and we will all have a mental paradigm change. Some notable African leaders: of Ghana, Botswana, Tanzania, and South Africa’s Mandela, stepped down voluntarily. If the PM keeps his word and steps down, he will join that illustrious group of men and will have propelled not only Ethiopian, but African politics, far ahead into the future.