

Report on the current drought in Awsa and the potential effects of the Tendaho sugar plantation on the oasis

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A canal in Assayta wereda, on February 27th, 2016.
Water should normally reach the trunk serving as a bridge. © Sabine Planel & Mehdi Labzaé

This report is based on a 10 days fieldwork mission conducted in Assayta, Afambo and Dubti *wereda* between February 19th and March 1st 2016. The mission took place within the framework of a wider research project on agricultural transformation and development in Awsa oasis. This text aims at shedding light on the current situation regarding water shortage, its consequences in the three *weredas*, and the potentially harmful future development of the Tendaho sugar plantation. This preliminary report precedes a deeper ground based analysis and proceeds from a common concern about the current situation of the farmers in time of drought. Then, it aims at documenting local and daily lives of farmers, which remain globally unknown in Addis-Abeba or abroad.

Located at the end of the Awash River in the North-Eastern part of the Afar Regional State, Awsa is an oasis where land has been farmed for centuries. Historically, it has been the seat of the Awsa sultanate, which was a legacy of the 16th century Adal sultanate and remained the political centre of the Afar polity until the fall of the imperial regime¹. If the political authority of the Awsa sultan has somewhat diminished during the last forty years, Awsa remains the centre of the Afar economy. Not only is the oasis located on historical commercial roads linking highland Ethiopia to the coast; it is also an important cereal-producing hub in an economy largely dominated by pastoralism.

¹ See Yasin Mohammed Yasin, 2008, « Political history of the Afar in Ethiopia and Eritrea », *Africa Spectrum*, vol.43, n°1, p. 39-65 ; Aramis Houmed Soulé, 2013, *Les Afar, la révolution éthiopienne et le régime du Derg (1974-1991)*, Centre Français des Etudes Ethiopiennes, Addis Ababa ; John Markakis, 2011, *Ethiopia : the last two frontiers*, James Currey, Woodbridge, p. 45-53 ; 136-141 ; 205-210 ; 292-305.

As adapted to arid environments as pastoralism and nomadism might be, nomads often need a place to retreat in case of strong droughts leading to the disappearance of grazing land. Solidarity between pastoralists outside the oasis and settled farmers inside are based on lineage and clan structures. Thus, Awsa farmers provide water, fodder, and food to pastoralists when times become harder for them; they support each other through traditional institutions committed in financial exchanges. Surprisingly, in times of wealth, they can even allow outsiders to plough their land, or in some cases to cultivate a share of their own plot². As peasants puts it: “*We assist Afars from outside the oasis according to our means, but this year we ourselves ask for assistance*”³.

During the past 50 years, the North-Eastern part of the Afar region has seen the development of large-scale farming. Cotton cultivation started at the end of the imperial period, at a time when the Awsa sultan wanted to modernize his people’s agricultural practices. Later on, the Derg regime created state farm and collectivized land in the area. The EPRDF government also engaged in agricultural farming in the area, notably through the conversion of cotton farms into a state-owned sugarcane plantation, the Tendaho sugar plantation. On the upstream of Loggia town, a dam has been built on the Awash River, receiving also some water from the Mille River. Completed in 2014, the dam’s reservoir has been filled starting from 2009. Its total capacity of 1.8 billion cubic metres of water should allow, in the coming years, the irrigation of 50,000 hectares for sugarcane cultivation. Production targets announced by the company are 619,000 tons of sugar and 63,000 metre cube ethanol annually⁴. All land currently farmed is located out of the oasis in Dubti *wereda*, but 25,000 hectares are planned to be turned to sugarcane in Assayta *wereda*, inside the oasis.

A picture of an oasis impoverishment

According to peasants, the oasis is currently facing one of the toughest droughts it has ever known. Entering the oasis, the Awash River flows into two smaller rivers that both empty into Afambo and Barrio lakes, before eventually ending up in Lake Abbe. Illelta River flows through Afambo *wereda*, while Simbeleta brings water to both Assayta and Afambo *wereda*. Water in these two main courses is currently between 40 cm and one meter below its normal level, and the water flow is not strong enough to bring water to smaller canals used by peasants to irrigate their parcels. A peasant living in Alassabolo, Afambo *wereda*, detailed us the recent pressure on water, especially for those who own plots far from the main canal: “*I cannot water my field every day, as I used to do few years ago. Now someone [between my plot and the canal] uses water for his plot, and another for his cattle, so that no water can reach my plot.*”⁵ According to the local water-sharing agreement, and because of the current drought, he receives water only once in ten days.

Many farmers complain about a recent lack of water. Starting from last year, maize yields decreased from an average 10/15 quintals per hectare and per harvest to between 5 and 7 qtls/ha. Although they have not experienced it for the past five years at least, what farmers estimate as a good harvest yields weights around 30 qtls/ha. Despite differences in terms of farming productivity, they all point out that the yield decrease will have noticeable impacts on household food security, especially for those who cannot rely on cash crop like palm fruits. This is the case of many farmers around Simbeleta River. This year’s food shortage started in September, when the first round of governmental aid for drought started to be distributed (see below). In December, farmers multiplied the *karawot* (small dams) on the main canals and on the two Awashes (see below), as they faced the hardest time of the drought.

When compared to our last visit four years ago, we noticed a clear drop in the intensity of peasant agriculture. Farmers sowed maize in late October and November 2015 when water was still

² See 2012’s data, partially published in Sabine Planel., 2015, « Transferts de terre en Ethiopie : contrôle foncier et contrôle politique », in Redon M., Magrin G., Chauvin E., Lavie E., Perrier-Bruslé (dir.), 2015, *Ressources mondialisées. Essais de géographie politique*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, coll. Territoires en mouvement, p. 225-246

³ A peasant from Anale, Assayta *wereda*, interviewed on February 27th, 2016. Translated from Afar.

⁴ See the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation official website: <http://www.etsugar.gov.et/index.php/en/factories/tendaho-sugar-factory>, accessed on March 4th, 2016.

⁵ A peasant from Alasabolo, Afambo *wereda*, February 23rd, 2016. Translated from Afar.

available – even if already not at its usual level. Maize grew for roughly two months before water became so scarce that it couldn't reach the parcels in most of Assayta *wereda*, and many parts of Afambo. Since mid-January, maize 'burned' in the fields, and is now only fit to be given as fodder for the cattle.

Despite sharing a common situation with all farmers of Awsa, residents of Afambo seem to benefit from a slightly better position, as Illelta flows more regularly and as some of them, living beside the main road, can be connected to both Illelta and Simbeleta rivers. In some parts of Assayta *wereda* where farmers harvest maize only once in a year, water shortage have been so acute that parcels are left fallow for the second consecutive year. Farmers told us that the water flow in Simbeleta last year was roughly what it is today in Illelta. This year, Simbeleta completely dried out.

Agricultural practices are also much less diverse than they used to be. Vegetables (tomatoes, cabbage, onions, chilli...) that used to count among the farmers' main cash crops are disappearing from Afambo as the few farmers who sowed it sadly note the dryness of their garden crops. Some farmers who own palm trees rely on dates, much of them sell goats to buy their food, and a few have job opportunities elsewhere. Others rely on the salaries of relatives hired in town as civil servants or at the sugar plantation.

Cattle suffer a great deal from the droughts, and we did not find any herder who had not lost any cattle in the past two years. Cattle feeding on 'burned' cotton and maize fields become thirsty and die thereafter. Farmers inside the oasis do not give high cattle mortality figures for the past few months; they rather observe a slower reduction of their herd. "*I had more than 20 cows before, nowadays if 4 remain it will be nice*", commented an old man⁶. As Afar pastoralist economy seems resilient enough inside the oasis – and only inside – livestock still includes cows and oxen, and not only camel or sheep and goats.

If Awsa inhabitants are used to drink water from the Awash River, they now have to drink the muddy water that is left in the canals' beds, and suffer from the diseases it brings. In Assayta, some peasants have to walk three to four hours to take water from a water truck provided by governmental administration through the *wereda*.

Of the many investors active in Assayta *wereda* four years ago, almost none is still present. This is also true for Afambo, although there were fewer investors. If some farmers and clan leaders in charge of attributing land to investors blame weak cotton prices, all agree that the water shortages of the past two years are the main reasons behind the departure of investors. At the entrance of the oasis, invasive scrubs now take root in what used to be cotton fields.

Broader climate changes?

Of course, one of the reasons for the current drought is undoubtedly to be found in the global El Niño climatic event that led to severe rain shortages in many parts of the world, and especially in Ethiopia. An engineer from Tendaho Sugar Factory told us that as observed inside the Tendaho dam located in Dubti, water level is so far below its minimum that no one has seriously estimated it⁷. Likewise, an adviser from the Afar regional president reported that there were places where the lake's water was only one metre deep, where it should be around 19 metres⁸.

However, we have strong reasons to believe that the current drought in Awsa and the difficulties it entails are not only due to El Niño. However acute this year's lack of rain, farmers date water shortages to earlier periods. Swamps located at the end of the Awash River, around lakes Afambo and Bario, have been dry for the last four years. Likewise, Lake Bario's shore has retreated so

⁶ A peasant from Boina *sefera*, Dubti *wereda*, February 24th, 2016. Translated from Afar.

⁷ Interview, Dubti, February 25th, 2016.

⁸ Interview, Semara, February 22nd, 2016.

much that herders do not have any direct access to the lake. Invasive *prosopis* scrubs have colonized the whole oasis during the last twenty years. Here as in many other pastoralist areas of the country, peasants nicknamed these scrubs 'Woyane' and blame the current regime for having imported this hitherto unknown vegetation.

More strikingly, the drying out of the oasis dates back more or less to the launching steps of the governmental Tendaho sugar plantation. The Tendaho project started 10 years ago (1997 Ethiopian Calendar) with the construction of the Tendaho dam, also known locally as the "Loggia dam". The 6th canal, *i.e.* the most recent one, was completed in 2015. In between, sugarcane cultivation progressively spread to areas neighbouring the dam. Sites were prepared and planted one after the other, eventually covering 18,000 hectares harvested in June 2014. Peasants know that water used to irrigate the sugar plantation located upstream cannot reach the oasis. Although they know that this year's rainfall has been very light in the highlands, many consider the Tendaho complex as mainly responsible for the current drought, for they know that the reservoir's water goes first to the sugarcane fields. "*I've never seen the dam [ie. Tendaho Dam] but I know it causes the drought. Because, usually when drought comes the water's level doesn't move every day. Then we know it's the Dam. We have drought too but the problem is the Dam.*"⁹

Some of the peasants who had refused to give their lands to the sugarcane plantation in exchange for compensation and villagisation (see below) even consider the current water shortage as a punishment from the government. As an aged camel keeper mentioned: "*Government people throw Woyane [scrubs] everywhere, they cut off water inside the canals and they cut down trees to produce charcoal*"¹⁰. "*They went in our houses, they wanted to take our land from us. They asked to harvest our maize so that we can move our house and settle on our fields. They want us to cross the Red Sea. So many of us cannot fall asleep for wondering about it. How could we feed our children if they take our land for the sugarcane? They cut off water in Afambo and Assayta, because we refused. Now, here, we are facing so many difficulties.*"¹¹

During a regular meeting held by *wereda* representatives in Mego *kebele* (Afambo *wereda*) a farmer accused government authorities who were asking farmers to reduce the number of *karawot* on the river: "*You are the one who cut off the water, and now you ask us to make it come again. Water cannot flow up the stream*"¹². *Wereda* representatives formally warned him and noted his name.

Peasants and Government strategies for coping with drought

Facing drought, peasants resort to usual ways of sharing water in the oasis. The economy and social organisation of the oasis are resilient to natural events such as droughts or floods. Social institutions such as canal chiefs (*duraabbat*) allow a relatively peaceful repartition of scarce water. When the level of water decreases, peasants build small dams made of trunks and branches they call *karawot*. The *karawot* are made to increase the pressure in the main canals so that it flows into smaller canals irrigating the parcels. *Duraabbat* are in charge of making sure each peasant uses the amount of water he is entitled to, on an egalitarian basis. Peasants profit from the canals' water by turn, and anyone who does not wait for his turn to build a *karawot* is charged with a 300 ETB fine paid to the *duraabbat*. From December 2015, farmers multiplied *karawot* on both rivers. A *duraabbat* from Assayta¹³ noticed that this year, four new structures were built on Simbeleta River in only 300 metres. He added that he has never observed such a density of dams. Despite or because of this rise, basic wood constructions are not enough to increase the pressure so that water can reach secondary canals. Farmers remain unable to water their fields.

⁹ A peasant from AlassaBolo, Afambo *wereda*, interviewed on February 23rd, 2016, Translated from Amharic.

¹⁰ A peasant from Anale, Assayta *wereda*, interviewed on February 26th, 2016. Translated from Afar.

¹¹ A peasant from Anale, Assayta *wereda*, interviewed on February 26th, 2016. Translated from Afar.

¹² A peasant from Mego, Afambo *wereda*, interviewed on February 25th, 2016. Translated from Amharic.

¹³ Interviewed in Anale, Assayta *wereda*, on February 28th, 2016.



This panoramic view of a curve of Illelta River shows two *karawot* in less than 40 metres. A third one was located less than 30 metres downstream. February 24th, 2016. © Sabine Planel & Mehdi Labzaé.

Faced with such an acute water shortage, wereda administrators brought motor pumps to some farmers. One farmer explained to us how he had to beg the authorities to be granted such a pump. He got it and used it but said he won't do so again, for he was asked to pay for the fuel and for the *per-diem* of the *wereda*'s civil servant in charge of making the pump work. But in time of drought, motor pumps prove to be useless. Administrators also take part in the collective design of *karrawot*, teaching local communities how to strengthen the structures with tarpaulins and large plastic sheets and how to proceed to a fair distribution of water. As the head of the agricultural department of Afambo *wereda* comments: "*When they have enough water they know how to organise themselves, in a fair way. But now tensions may raise and we have to discuss with the duraabbat*". He concludes: "*They know techniques but they don't know how to organise themselves!*"¹⁴. Therefore, *wereda* authorities relegated *duraabbats*' task to the management of the fields and secondary canals, while they rule the river's flow. As an example, during a fast and unexpected flow of the Loggia River that levelled up water inside canals or river beds, they warned farmers to destroy their dams built a few weeks ago to prevent flooding. But as *karrawot* buildings require important labour, farmers were reluctant to collaborate.

In time of drought, solutions and assistance provided amongst local communities are not only dedicated to water issues. For example, population density seasonally increases inside the oasis as herders from outside gather on dried fields, but sometimes also on green ones. Farmers therefore developed various rules to protect their plots, including fines¹⁵. Local or traditional authorities may be involved in settling conflicts (especially the *duraabat*), depending on whether people living outside the oasis are involved. Ethiopian courts accept this traditional exercise of justice and consider the *durraabbat* as the legal body responsible of water management in local communities.

The government is also providing food aid for affected farmers. In Assayta *wereda*, 10,500 new beneficiaries received governmental assistance from September 2015. The new beneficiaries are to be added to the 14 235 farmers already enrolled in the Productive Safety Net Programme¹⁶. The amount of wheat provided by *wereda* administrations within the framework of this new governmental relief differs from place to place; formally it is estimated at 15 kg per household and per month. Many farmers have shown us the small jute sacks containing roughly 5 kg wheat that they receive each month. Every two or three months, wheat is replaced by maize. In some cases, four families have to share a 50kg portion of cereals. Though *wereda* administrators argue that cooking oil is included in the aid package provided by the government, this item doesn't reach the peasants. As one of them laments: "*We've never seen, but we've heard about it. They ate it all!*"¹⁷. This accusation against local authorities has been reported many times, and it raises concerns about the embezzlement and misappropriation of governmental relief by local authorities and/or civil servants.

Administrators from the region hosted a meeting attended by FDRE's President Dr. Mulatu Teshome, clan leaders including Habib Ali Mirrah¹⁸, *wereda* administrators, and the usual representatives of elders, women and youth. Representatives from the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation

¹⁴ Interviewed on February 25th, in Afambo. Translated from Amharic.

¹⁵ 120 ETB by head of cattle caught on a field in Assayta.

¹⁶ These PSNP data were provided by the *wereda*, and might not be up-to-date.

¹⁷ A peasant interviewed in Boyna *sefera* on February 24th, 2016. Translated from Afar.

¹⁸ Sultan Hanfare's brother in charge of managing local affairs, and especially familial lands.

were also there, and negotiations took place on how to share water flowing from the reservoir. It was decided that the sugar plantation and the oasis dwellers would each benefit from the water, in turn: 3 days and nights for the plantation, 3 days and nights for the oasis. On this point, it is worth noting that our informers – administrators and peasants as well – did not all agree on the terms of the agreement. For some of them, the share was made on a three-day basis, while others talked about a four-day sequence. In any case, no regularity is to be observed in the oasis: it takes water almost two days to flow to Assayta *wereda*, and upstream debiting and drainage in Dubti *wereda* is so significant that it is impossible for peasants to differentiate an ‘open’ day from a ‘closed’ one.

Without strong and sustained rainfall filling the Awash River, Tendaho dam’s reservoir is also threatened. To refill it, the authorities are planning to derivate Lake Gewane’s waters into the Awash¹⁹. Located less than 5 km from the Awash River, some 190 km upstream from the dam, Lake Gewane’s water is potable for cattle and humans, whereas Lake Besseka’s, located further upstream, is not. Digging work is said to have started. To our knowledge, the government has not considered releasing water from the Koka Reservoir, which could also be envisaged as an additional source of clean water.

After the drought: outgrowing and plantation expansion

By selling their cattle and resorting to traditional solidarity mechanisms, Awsa farmers will survive this severe drought. This will be done at the cost of a new impoverishment of the farmers living in the oasis. Though people are getting sick and dying due to the poor quality of the water, we have not heard any report of deaths directly linked to malnutrition. In any case, distinguishing causes of mortality shouldn’t obscure the very fact that Awsa dwellers are highly vulnerable to short term climate variabilities. Future plans regarding the development and management of the Tendaho plantation could have further consequences for peasants’ lives.

Phase II & villagisation

Out of the 50,000 hectares that should eventually be farmed for sugarcane production, 25,000 hectares referred as ‘phase II’ are located in Assayta *wereda*. Lands targeted by the Corporation are currently farmed on the basis of an original arrangement between farmers, clan leaders and investors. Under the Derg regime, these plots were collectivized and included in state cotton farms. After the fall of the junta, these lands were redistributed by the new EPRDF government to clans active in the armed struggle. This was decided and executed together with Sultan Ali Mirrah, which gave the redistribution a high legitimacy. Accordingly, the new land rights were granted by both the state and traditional authorities, which made them relatively secure. Parcels granted to clans vary in amount from a dozen to 300 hectares. Clan land is divided in smaller familial plots measuring around one hectare each. Each household belonging to the clan can thus farm one hectare in a private way. However, these small parcels are not to be considered as private or family-owned, for they are also cultivated on a collective basis. In fact, farmers make one maize harvest per year, reaped in February or March. Between June and late September, cotton is grown on the same parcels, but not by farmers. Investors recruited by the clan are in charge of cotton cultivation. Cotton is shared between the investor (two thirds) and the smallholders (one third), in kind, just after the harvest.

Clan leader or clan-designated chiefs are in charge of managing land and recruiting the investors. Usually they pay specific attention to benefitting their fellows, by demanding that investors allocate some farmers as guards on the cotton fields. For the past two or three years, many have been unable to find investors willing to plot their land. As mentioned by the peasants, water shortages and low cotton prices on local markets seem to have discouraged potential investors from engaging in cotton farming.

¹⁹ Interview with an engineer from Tendaho Sugar Factory, Dubti, February 25th, 2016.

This specific agrarian setting makes us think that land appropriation would be easier than in a smallholder-agriculture setting. Indeed, clan leaders in charge of land management sometimes also bear political responsibilities in state and party apparatuses, most notably at the *wereda* level. In the past, Afar clan leaders have sold or rented land without their community's consent, or without sharing the benefits with them²⁰. Given the pressure put by the government to reach its overinflated sugar production targets, the chance of seeing leaders opposing the allocation of their land to the Sugar Factory seems low. Assayta *wereda*'s vice-president and the Party's public relations officer explained to us that farmers rejected the extension project in Assayta because they are not familiar with sugarcane culture. But they often go and visit *kebelés* to "teach them the benefits of sugarcane, so that later on they can agree"²¹.

Although this original agrarian setting combining smallholder farming and large-scale plantation is also present in Afambo, it seems to be less widespread. Farmers who harvest twice a year are more numerous there. This is not to say that planners chose Assayta on purpose for phase II. Nevertheless, they intend to expand the plantation in an area where land management practices and agrarian setting will be very helpful.

In Assayta – and to a lesser extent in Afambo – peasants have been approached by *wereda* authorities to accept a villagisation programme. It has been carried out during the last four years in three *kebelés* in Afambo, although many peasants refused the villagisation. During the meetings organised by the authorities to present the programme, peasants were told that they would receive a compensation for land they would leave to the sugar plantation. They refused. Although farmers don't precisely detail the origins of villagisation, the process was complex and went on for months, at least from November 2011 to July 2012. Our previous interviews revealed that in addition to collective meetings, individual contacts were organised with farmers to discuss precise amount of compensation. 1 000 ETB by household members were offered to sceptical farmers, who commonly rejected the project with the moral support of the sultan. Later on, violence broke out between farmers, Tendaho's Indian staff and *wereda* policemen²².

Meetings calling for villagisation and visits from *wereda* officials did not resume until the current drought. "If we don't have water and nothing to eat, how could they resettle us?"²³. If the programme is suspended because of drought, it is by no means cancelled. Afambo administrators are clear: "If people gather we can provide basic services. Electricity cannot be brought for 3 houses. The villagisation aims at creating market opportunities for the people. Our national plan is to transfer our economic activity from pastoralism to agriculture and then to industry. To do so, people need to have market activities. When people live in villages, they open small shops, like tea houses. This is not industry, but this is part of the transformation from rurality to urbanity"²⁴. In 2011, peasants were comforted in their refusal of villagisation and land alienation when the newly enthroned Awsa sultan Hanfare Ali Mirrah stood by them, most notably during a bombastic speech at his enthroning ceremony. Now, peasants' feelings towards their sultan are a mix of hope, frustration and resentment: "We miss him. We need him here!"²⁵, "He is abroad making the world's governments aware about the Afar struggle"²⁶, "The sultan? Don't raise his name, we don't appreciate him. His assistance did not reach us and we miss it!"²⁷ "We suffer from hunger. Please tell it to the sultan in my name!"²⁸.

²⁰ See, among others, Aramis Houmed Soulé, *Les Afar, la révolution éthiopienne et le régime du Derg (1974-1991)*, Centre Français des Etudes Ethiopiennes, Addis-Abeba, 2013, p. 27.

²¹ Interviewed in their offices in Assayta on February 26th, 2016. Translated from Amharic.

²² See Sabine Planel., 2015, « Transferts de terre en Ethiopie : contrôle foncier et contrôle politique », in Redon M., Magrin G., Chauvin E., Lavie E., Perrier-Bruslé (dir.), 2015, *Ressources mondialisées. Essais de géographie politique*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, coll. Territoires en mouvement, p. 225-246.

²³ Interview translated from Afar, Assayta, Anale, Bohole, Hussein G.

²⁴ Interview with Afambo *wereda*'s vice-president, Afambo, February 26th, 2016. Translated from Amharic.

²⁵ A peasant from Anale, Assayta *wereda*, interviewed on February 26th, 2016. Translated from Afar.

²⁶ A peasant from Anale Assayta *wereda*, interviewed on February 26th, 2016. Translated from Afar.

²⁷ A peasant from Anale, Assayta *wereda*, interviewed on February 27th, 2016. Translated from Afar.

²⁸ A peasant from Anale, Assayta *wereda*, interviewed on February 28th, 2016. Translated from Afar.

Outgrowing programme

The Ethiopian Sugar Corporation announced that Tendaho plantation would create “*job opportunities*” for 50,000 citizens²⁹. The authorities are fully aware that providing compensation and jobs to people displaced by the plantation, together with making sure that local communities also benefit from the project, are key elements to ensure the sustainability of its activities. One might then wonder how local peasants can be included in the new plantation economy. To get a clearer idea of what they might become, we visited Dubti *wereda*, where peasants who have been gathered into villages by the government were approached by the Corporation to work in its fields and to be enrolled in an outgrowing programme.

The contract farming programme launched in Dubti has specific modalities. The peasant does not actually farm his plot; the Corporation handles everything from ploughing to harvesting and transporting the sugarcane to the factory. The enterprise brings in agricultural workers from SNNP, Amhara and Tigray regions, and supervises their work. Drawing on what had been experienced at the Wonji plantation, 6 sugarcane unions have recently been established with 16 to 20 members each. The peasant whose land is farmed is not directly connected with the enterprise but with one of these farming cooperatives. The only direct link he has with the plantation is his being hired as a warden, in charge of protecting sugarcane from cattle intrusions. Peasants are responsible in case of cattle encroachments and damages to the sugarcane. His commitment to the cooperative has no time restriction, like the regular membership of any cooperative. The agreement provides that the Corporation buys the harvest at market prices. Selling prices are estimated by a specific commission drawn from union and factory representatives. Regional and plantation authorities have no right to interfere in decisions but they are committed to the execution of the agreement. All costs linked with inputs and daily workforce are deducted from the harvest price so that benefits finally collected by farmers may be far below the 30,000 ETB per hectare they are expecting³⁰. Indeed, many of them are expecting a minimum price to be given by the company in case of a small harvest, but the Tendaho engineer supervising agricultural production and planning whom we met didn't confirm their hope. Rather, he referred to a potential declaration of “*national disaster*” to answer farmers' claims of compensation for the current drought³¹. Nothing has been paid for this year's harvest as plants were not yet mature and as the production may not reach the expected yield of 1350 tons per hectare, due to the lack of water. With an average yield of 700 t/ha reached inside plantation fields, the last harvest gathered in June 2014 wasn't much better.

Farmers currently enrolled in the outgrowing programme are people who took part in the government's villagisation programme, and land where sugarcane is currently grown is the land they were granted when they moved five years ago and where they had to clean *Woyane* scrubs. According to farmers' perception, this production grab is similar to a land grab, and they blame regional authorities for having “eaten” their expected compensations³². These parcels were formerly pasture land, used by pastoralists living in Dubti area. The Sugar Corporation plans to allocated 10,000 hectares of pasture and farming land to the host communities, but as our informant told us : “*If Phase II is not implemented in Assayta, we should reallocate this grazing land to sugarcane production, by extending the canal network. Then, we'll find other sites for the 10,000 ha of land devoted to local communities – but for the time being I don't have a single idea of where it could be!*”³³. To date, these plots are located at the outskirts of the plantation. Local history of the past fifty years involves many such back and forth movements of appropriation and recovery of land between commercial farming and clan-organised smallholders. The current developments around the sugar plantation might be just another episode of this story.

The Tendaho complex has other impacts on local economy, especially related to employment. Two main job opportunities are created for the peasants: they can work as agricultural wage labourers

²⁹ See : <http://www.etsugar.gov.et/index.php/en/factories/tendaho-sugar-factory>, last accessed March 5th, 2016.

³⁰ Interview with peasants, Boyna camp, February 23rd, 2016. Translated from Amharic.

³¹ Interview with Tendaho's responsible for agricultural production and planning, Dubti, February 25th, 2016.

³² Interview with peasants, Boyna *sefera*, February 24th, 2016.

³³ Interview with Tendaho's responsible for agricultural production and planning, Dubti, February 25th, 2016.

or as plantation guards. This last option is what most of the farmers engage in, protecting plants and harvest from cattle. If elders seem to be more often selected in Dubti's population to protect the fields, a few young men from Assayta are also hired by Tendaho and positioned nearby the factory. The son-in-law of a peasant we interviewed earns 800 ETB a month and works every night, from 6 P.M. to 6 A.M., without any resting day³⁴. Thanks to his income, he can support a six-person household.

A common rejection of the Tendaho complex characterises the current situation. Farmers and local authorities as well consider that "*Afar people don't know sugarcane and sugarcane doesn't fit for cattle*"³⁵ as its leaves are not appropriate as fodder. "*We don't know sugarcane, we don't understand the interest*"³⁶. Despite a shared disinclination for villagisation and outgrowing altogether, farmers feel unwillingly involved into this economical shift "*If we stop now, what will be the government answer? If we stop, it has to be once, all together*"³⁷.

As a consequence, local communities organise themselves to protest and lobby for assistance. As a peasant relocated to Boyna *sefera* told us, the government brings a water truck every 10 days to supply peasants with water³⁸. It used to be every 15 or 20 days, but some peasants, as one of them puts it, "*shouted at Seyoum*" (the Region's president) during the previous meeting. He detailed their assertion by mentioning that the delegation sent for the meeting came from another village (*sefera*) where they "*have full bellies*", "*they are not poor as we are*"³⁹.

The farmers' understanding of the local environmental and economical context is also, to a large extent, political. A farmer from Anale concludes our interviews on this observation: "*How does it come that maize burns in a country where a government rules? It seems that there is no government!*"⁴⁰

Concluding remarks

Awsa represents the agricultural core of the Afar pastoralist economy, a settled and long-established power for a nomadic society. If the pastoralist activities of Awsa farmers still endure, agricultural practices cannot adapt to the ongoing drought and the noticeable reduction of water produced by Tendaho complex.

For the time being, tensions are growing amongst farmers and against government representatives. Access to drinking water for cattle – especially in the lake - multiplication of *karawot* on the rivers, or damages caused by herds on the rare plots still potentially fruitful for farmers raise tensions not only amongst Awsa dwellers, but also amongst Afars more generally. During a common interview, the whole audience echoed a *durrabat's* wisdom "*Tensions raise amongst people. This won't last without killing people*"⁴¹.

Afars commonly fear for their future: "*We, Afar, we will die here, with our goats!*"⁴². Their fear implies the understanding of a structural change, and does not simply result from the seasonal impact of a drought, as reflected by this quotation from a peasant, drawing on an Afar proverb: "*whether your time will be good, whether it will be the one of your children. But for us, with the sugar, we will die with hardship and will see our people die from hunger*"⁴³.

³⁴ Interview translated from Amharic, Anale, Assayta *wereda*, February 28th, 2016.

³⁵ As stated by Afambo *wereda's* president, interviewed on February 26th, 2016. Translated from Amharic.

³⁶ A farmer from Alassabolo, Afambo *wereda*, interviewed on February 23rd, 2016. Translated from Afar.

³⁷ A peasant relocated to Boyna *sefera*, Dubti *wereda*, interviewed on February 24th, 2016. Translated from Afar.

³⁸ *Idem*.

³⁹ *Idem*.

⁴⁰ Interviewed on February 26th, 2016, translated from Amharic.

⁴¹ Interview, Anale, Assayta *wereda*, February 28th, 2016. Translated from Amharic.

⁴² A peasant from Anale, Assayta *wereda*, interviewed on February 28th, 2016. Translated from Afar.

⁴³ *Idem*.