

## **Respecting minority rights as a means of preventing or mitigating the impact of humanitarian crises: Case of Anywa Community, Gambella Ethiopia**

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Mr. President, distinguished delegates, ladies & gentlemen,

It is an honour to address this Forum on Minority Issues and I would like to express my gratitude to the SR for giving me this opportunity. My intervention will shed light on the contribution of respect for minority rights to prevention and mitigation of humanitarian crises instigated by violent conflicts. In my presentation, I will draw up on my personal experience from the Gambella region of Ethiopia and I also bring some reflections from my professional background as a former OHCHR's Minority Fellow and currently as Advocacy Officer for the Lutheran World Federation.

Mr President,

In most cases, minorities suffer from "hidden humanitarian crises". My first interaction with the UN human rights was 11 years ago when I came to voice the human rights situation of the Anywa community to then 'Working Group on Minorities'. Anywa is a minority ethnic group located in the Gambella region of Ethiopia with some in the Republic of South Sudan. Historically, this community, like any other lowland communities, have been politically disenfranchised, economically marginalized and socially discriminated against. Despite some notable progress being made after the introduction of federalism in 1991, minority regions in general continue to lag behind in terms of economic development and political inclusion. As a consequence, ethnic tensions, conflicts and insecurity have been synonymous with the Gambella region. However, on December 13, 2003, these long-simmering ethnic tensions erupted into a massacre of the Anywa community in which according to Human rights watch, 424 Anywa civilians were massacred in Gambella town in single day, over 400 houses belonging to them were burned to the ground and their entire neighbourhoods ransacked and looted. Throughout 2004, as this violence turned into broad-based military operation on the entire Anywa population, over 15,000 fled to South Sudan and more than 50,000 became internally displaced. This is more than 60% of the entire Anywa population. For them this was the biggest 'humanitarian crisis' ever in their history as a community.

Regrettably, despite the magnitude of this crisis to this community, no one came to their aid, except for few international organizations, because this was not recognized as a humanitarian crisis. After all, it was affecting a tiny minority group in a remote region.

This situation is not peculiar to Anywa community, but a common pattern that affects minorities during humanitarian crises. Crises and disasters that hit minority areas mostly go unrecognized and attract little to no attention. Especially if those disasters in one way or another involve national governments, deliberate efforts will be made to conceal them from national or international attention.

Therefore, as we discuss “minorities in situations of humanitarian crises”, it is very important to look at what constitute humanitarian crises, who defines and declares a situation as a “humanitarian crises”, because mostly the definitions of these terminologies in themselves are very discriminatory towards minorities.

Mr President,

To come back to the linkage between respect for minority rights and prevention or mitigation of humanitarian crises, there are a lot that can be said, but I would like to highlight the following four points in the interest of time.

First, minorities’ meaningful participation in all decisions making bodies at all levels is key to preventing violent conflicts from happening in the very first place. It is well documented that exclusion and discrimination against minorities are at the heart of many conflicts around the world. Minorities demand for participation in decisions that affect their lives and wellbeing are most often met with further repressions and intimidations. These methods are not only contrary to international human rights laws and standards, but practically they have also proved to be counterproductive. It is time for national governments to change course. Meaningful participation and representation of minorities does not only reduce incidences of violence, but also facilitates national development for all citizens. Although this in itself is not disputed, the challenge for minorities most often lies in the quality and modalities of these participation and representation mechanisms.

In Ethiopia, we have a federal constitution in place since 1994 that upholds right to self-determination and grants right to self-governance for all ethnic groups including minorities. However, although the new system brought many visible changes in terms of political representation of minorities and indigenous communities in local and regional administrations, the actual decision making power remained in the hands of the central government. Behind the formal governance structures, the central government uses parallel informal systems, such as advisors and federal security agents through which it maintains its grip on local governments particularly minority regions.

These types of symbolic participations do not help. Minorities need genuine representations not only just of their faces, but also of their voices, needs and long-term interests. Therefore, when discuss minority representation, it is vital to look into the processes of how minorities’ representatives are elected, who elects them and the powers of the offices into which they are elected. In situations where specific institutions

are created to enhance minorities' participation, it is important to ensure that these institutions are supported with necessary human and financial resources to enable them to properly discharge the mandates for which they are created.

Secondly, economic empowerment of minorities can serve both as a preventive measure to conflict induced humanitarian crises and as mitigative factor during or after humanitarian crises. On the opposite, economic exclusion of minorities can cause or contribute to conflicts between minorities and states, minorities against corporations, minorities versus majorities or even minorities against other minorities. As one MRG reports details:

Ill planned or intentionally discriminatory economic and development policies/programmes can deepen inequalities, entrench power and economic hierarchies, and stimulate or aggravate inter-ethnic tensions leading to conflict. Development that clashes with the priorities and needs of minorities and indigenous peoples, such as through the appropriation of lands, can lead to what is called 'development induced conflict'.

Development induced conflicts is a reality today for many minorities around the world. In Ethiopia, since 2007 the government has embarked on the promotion of large-scale agricultural investments as one of its major development programmes. As a matter of state policy, this programme was primarily promoted in minority regions because according to the officials there is 'vast unused nobody's lands' in these regions. Around the same time, the government also introduced villagization program supposedly to facilitate the provision of social services to scattered communities. Although the government maintained that these are two separate programs, minorities believe villagization was only used as pretext to free up more land for investors. The impacts of these policies on the Anywa community were immense. In 2012 at the peak of these two programs, hundreds of Anywa migrated to neighbouring countries in search of safety and security. Community elders and officials who questioned this program are still languishing in central prison in Addis Ababa charged under the controversial anti-terrorism law.

These types of economic development policies and programs do not help minorities. On the contrary, they worsen their situation by turning them into minorities even in their own regions. Governments need to put in place minority cantered economic empowerment programs that help minorities to be in charge of their economic wellbeing. Agricultural extension programs, small business schemes and connecting minority entrepreneurs to national and international market opportunities can be a win-win solution for minorities and majorities alike and encourage peaceful co-existence among communities.

Third, we cannot talk about development-induced conflicts without mentioning the role of international financial institutions, official development assistance and humanitarian organizations. Although many donors today ascribe to the different forms of the “Do No Harm” principle, when it comes to minorities, these principles and guidelines are most often ignored.

For example, around the same period when the Ethiopian government was promoting large-scale agricultural investments and villagization programs in minority regions, the World Bank also approved 2 billion USD under the so called “Promoting Basic Services (PBS)” project to be used for improving access to basic services nationwide. In Gambella, according to the World Bank’s own Inspection Panel, part of this money was used to pay salaries of officials who facilitated the villagization program. The Inspection Panel report also admitted that the Bank breached its own rules in designing and supervising the PBS project including failing to apply its policy on indigenous Peoples. However, despite these findings, the Inspection Panel concluded that the Bank could not be held responsible for relocations and harms suffered by the Anywa community in Gambella.

This demonstrates the level of vulnerability of minorities not only in the hands of their national governments but also before international organizations that are supposed to uphold these international human rights standards. Therefore, this calls for donors to put in place mechanisms to ensure that their funds are not used to abuse minorities but benefit them.

Finally, none of the above can be achieved without an enabling civil society space whereby minorities could freely organize, associate and peacefully defend their interests. The ultimate guarantor of minorities rights are neither their representatives/institutions, nor international organizations. It is minorities themselves. If there is no democratic space for minorities to constantly hold their representatives and institutions in check or to question economic development policies and lodge complaints to independent bodies without fear of reprisals, none of the above can be achieved. Unfortunately this is an area where minorities and majorities alike suffer in Ethiopia. The recent nearly nationwide protests and the declaration of state of emergency are indicators of the consequences of closing civil society space.

Therefore, if we have to ensure sustainable peace, equitable development and just society, maximum civil society space where different views are peacefully expressed and contested, is indeed need to be embraced as the solution not stifled as the problem.