

## Conference Reports

interested to submit a concrete conference organisation proposal, if there is an institution which would offer to organize one of the future conferences.

The next conference (ICES19) is planned to be held in Warsaw, Poland, in 2015, as Dr Hanna Rubinkowska had offered representing Warsaw University. This was unanimously accepted by the International Organizing Committee.

Wolbert SMIDT<sup>4</sup> – Chikage OBA-SMIDT<sup>5</sup>

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### **National Workshop: “Socio-cultural Impact Assessment of the Welqayt Sugar and Irrigation Project”, 6 October 2012, Mekelle University**

The national workshop discussing the socio-cultural impact assessment of the Welqayt Sugar and Irrigation Project was opened by *Ato* Solomon Tesfa-Mariam, acting Director of IPHC (Institute of Paleo-Environment and Heritage Conservation, Mekelle University). Dr. Joachim Herzig, President of Mekelle University, then made an opening speech. Prof. Herzig, after welcoming the guests, discussed the complex relation between climate, culture and nature. He underlined that this complex and dynamic world of ours needs empirical understanding of the relation between conserving culture on the one hand, and developing agricultural practices and preserving the environment on the other. Conducting interdisciplinary research and cooperation between institutions, organizations and the public at large is a key to understanding the issues at hand. He said that the initiative taken by Mekelle University staff to carry out a large-scale study on the Welqayt lowlands and the impact of the planned development projects should be appreciated. He stressed that social, cultural and local knowledge should be an integral part of any development activities, with a feasibility study and impact assessment beforehand.

The first speaker, *Ato* Demes Yigzaw (a parliamentarian) of the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation, focused on two major issues: the status of the sugar project and its impact on the local community in general and the Monastery of Waldibba in particular. He summarized the potential for sugar development in Ethiopia, which aims at gearing the country's sugar production in the coming 12 to 15 years into one of the top ten in the world. He discussed the need and urgency of sugar development in the region as a key to Ethiopia's future. The speaker outlined major comparative advantages of the site for sugar plantation and irrigation compared to nearby sites. The potential of the area for sugar cultivation is because of the relative cost effectiveness of the area and its suitability for sugar cane plantation. Yet, he also mentioned that the nearby villages would be affected. There will be steps taken by the government to

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legally compensate those who are going to be evicted from their land. Educational facilities, health centers, water supply, local administration and infrastructures will be made ready for the people who are affected by the project in one way or another. All necessary preparations are under way in discussions with stakeholders, the locals and religious leaders, regarding cash compensation and identification of areas for resettlement. *Ato* Demese mentioned that the complete evacuation of one village and of two smaller churches in the lowlands affiliated to the highlands' Waldibba Monastery are the major challenges. Yet, negotiations with the stakeholders and the government in particular are already being carried out. He also reported that a socio-economic and socio-cultural impact assessment was done on the site before the inception of the project.

The second speaker dealt with media coverage of the project. *Ato* Teshome Tefera focused on two major media outlets: Voice of America (VoA) and Deutsche Welle. He noted that much of the reporting has not been supported by first-hand information, anonymous sources were used, reporters didn't make an effort to document the stakeholders' point of view and above all, most reports were sensational. The speaker claimed that in general the reporting was not fair and was characterized by a deliberate distortion of facts. Overall, the goal of the media, it seems, was not to challenge the project based on fair and free reporting but to misguide the audiences. The Voice of Germany (Deutsche Welle) Amharic service fared somewhat better in terms of reporting, according to him, using diversified sources and different reporters. It was commented that the government media also had shortcomings in terms of counter-reporting.

*Ato* Hailu Zeleke of the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH) shared lessons from national and international experiences on impact assessment. Impact assessment in Ethiopia is done based on the magnitude, duration, severity, range, frequency and cumulative effect of the criteria. The paper addressed major world standards on heritage conservation and the Ethiopian experience as part of it. Rescuing heritage from such grand projects has been part of the experience of the world and of Ethiopia; Ethiopia has had such experiences in Gibe III and in the Omo valley area. The paper was also accompanied by a discussion on the Ethiopian legal system and the protection given to social, cultural and religious heritages in the constitution and other proclamations such as the impact assessment proclamation No. 299/95 and the proclamation No. 209/1992. This paper culminated in an appeal for heritage protection, to make heritage part of development.

The first speaker of the early afternoon session, Dr Wolbert Smidt, project leader, spoke about the preliminary socio-cultural impact assessment on the project, with a contribution by Fesseha Berhe on the future plans of the project. He focused on the decision-making process during the conception of

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the project and a short summary of the initial findings of the study. He summarized the historical, cultural and religious significance of northern Ethiopia in general and of the studied site in particular, with the potential of the area as a possibly important pre-historic or historic site. The two presenters gave an overview of churches and shrines that will be directly affected by the ongoing development project. The documented ethnographic data, oral history, cultural and geographical information are the keys to the research. Development needs to be balanced with the social, cultural and other heritages of the area. Dr. Wolbert Smidt commented that further studies with a multi-disciplinary approach were highly needed, and the search for funders and cooperation partners for this Mekelle University project has been started.



*Fig. 1: Representatives of civil society, heritage institutions and universities during the morning session, 6 October 2012, photo by W.S.*

The three papers presented in the morning session were highly informative and gave an overall picture of the project from the angle of development versus cultural and heritage preservation, and of the media and its impact on bridging the information gap and the failure of the mentioned media institutions in reporting on the project. While the third paper focused on the national and international experience of impact assessment vis-a-vis local and global legal systems, the last presenter created an insightful journey into the area through the eyes of culture, society and heritage in general.

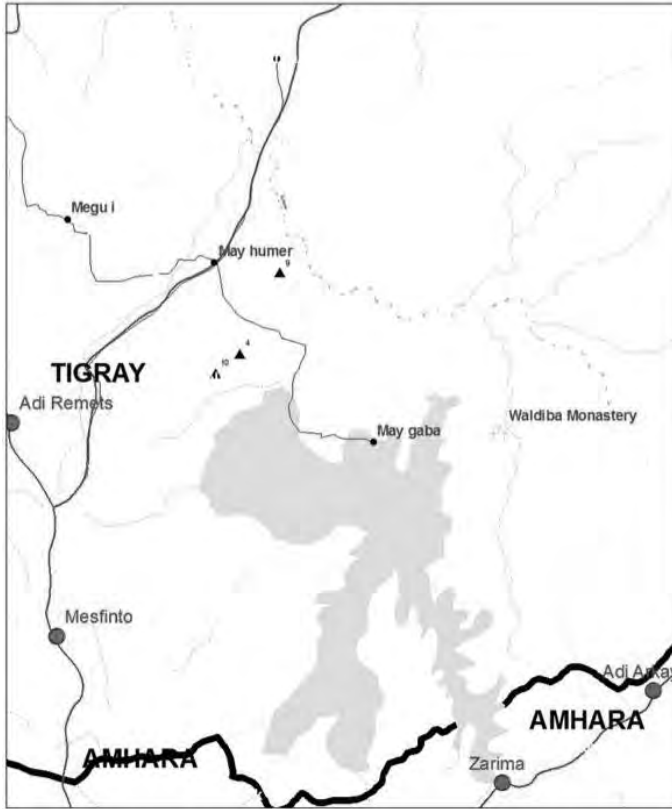


Fig. 2: Map of the project area, with the planned artificial lake, by Habtom Gebremedhin (source of data: EthioGIS & BOFED)

The workshop was a success in informing and in creating awareness. Finally, a closing remark was given by Dr. Ayele Bekerie, who underlined that while developmental issues are a key to the future of Ethiopia and the region in general, collaborative studies and research are very much needed. Presenters and the audience had reached a consensus that

developing the area is the primary focus, yet, proper care and protection need to be given to historical, cultural and environmental values of the people. Drawn into the ambitious plans of the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation, we need to be cautious about the social, cultural and religious treasures of the people and the country. As acknowledged by the Corporation, we must consider the fact that documentation is an ongoing, time- and energy-consuming process. Ato Demese Yigzaw of the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation, in his final note, said that the workshop was a success in harmonizing issues about the project. He also said that the corporation is ready to work with research institutes such as Mekelle University and an important lesson had been taken from the papers, which addressed the issues from different angles. Development is a key to Ethiopia's future; the area needs to be developed, and at the same time proper documentation of heritage in the area must be a priority.

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