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## Socio-Cultural Sustainability of the Awra Amba Community, and Its Implications for Intervention

**Ashenafi Alemu**

Department of English, University of Gondar, Ethiopia

**Eyaya Belay**

Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Gondar, Ethiopia

**Kurma Padmaja**

Department of English, University of Gondar, Ethiopia

**Tezera Gessesse**

Department of English, University of Gondar, Ethiopia

**Abstract:**

*Awra Amba is a small community living in South Gondar. It is characterized by its own living style and ideological praxis which makes it a unique philosophical landscape in the region attracting not less than 5000 local and international tourists per year as per 2011/12 statistics from the community leaders. In view of the above, the current study attempts to look at the Socio-cultural Sustainability of the community. Specifically, the study attempts to evaluate the level of sustainability, anticipate the extent of sustainability and recommend interventions as appropriate, identify the hindrances that hold back the economic and cultural state of affairs from spinning out in spatial and temporal facets. To achieve this, the researchers made use of focused group discussions, interviews, and structured observations by adopting sustainability checklist that fits the context. It is found out that the sustainability of the community is at stake because the means of income is not diversified and individuals working at the weaving centres are frequently experiencing health issues such as kidney failures as they work on traditional, sturdy machines all day long. The fact that the community is “rigid”(i.e. doesn't allow any form of plurality especially in religion and related ideologies) made the community to be isolated. Thus, the researchers argue that unless these things are reconsidered and measures taken, the community may not sustain its very existence in general and its socio-cultural practices in particular.*

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Awra Amba, Development

### 1. Introduction

Awra Amba is a small community living in the Southern Gondar, at a distance of 73 kilometres from the city of Bahir Dar. The community is characterized by its own living style and ideological praxis which makes it to be a unique philosophical landscape in the region attracting not less than 5000 local and international tourists as per the 2011/12 statistics from the community administration office. This community is founded by Zumra Nuru, a 60 years old Ethiopian farmer, based on the ideals of equality (Halpern, 2007). It is also stated therein that the ideals Zumra and the slogans of Awra Amba community could have made Karl Marx proud of his works. Because it is not subscribing to any religious ideology, the community experiences ostracism for its unique creeds (Mohammed, 2009).

Most striking about this community, in addition to the gender equity and the division of labour, is the fact that religion has no place in this community. In fact, Awra Amba can be described as a community which flared up as a result of the endeavors of its leader, Hon. Dr. Mr. Zumra Nuru to form an egalitarian and just society amidst religious competitions and ideology pulls exerted from the dominant Christians and the minority but strict Islam families and neighbours. This being the status quo of the community since the beginning, the sustainability of the Awra Amba community in general and the social and economic sustainability of the system in particular has never been questioned. It has never been investigated by researchers and scholars so far. As a result of this, no significant knowledge has been generated to understand the situation of the society in view of community sustainability.

The general objective of the study is to evaluate and explore the sustainability level of the socio-economic trend of the community. Specifically, the study attempts to qualitatively evaluate the level of sustainability, foresee the extent of sustainability and identify the hindrances that hold back the socio-cultural state of affairs from spinning out in spatial and temporal facets, and

## 2. Related Literature

According to López-Ridaura, (2005), “Sustainability is in the eye of the beholder”. That is, there is no universal and unequivocal definition of sustainability (ibid). It appears that the term sustainability is a relative and complex concept. In spite of this, the term is quite common in discussions related to development, environment, culture and related global contexts.

The existing literature about the concept demonstrates that sustainability is more measured than defined by developing and adopting a number of checklists that fit the purpose of researchers and evaluating organizations. According to López-Ridaura (2005), there are seven basic attributes for sustainability which are used in making such a checklist. These are Productivity, Stability, Reliability, Resilience, Adaptability, Equity and Self-reliance. Thus, she argues that in order for any system to be referred to as sustainable, it must demonstrate these seven attributes. Similar to these but much earlier, the 1996 United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) identified seven groups of indicators for community sustainability. These include Background data; Environmental management; Socioeconomic development; Local government; Infrastructure; Housing; and Transport. These indicators are currently being used in many cities around the world to prepare reports on local community sustainability (UNESCO, 2010).

In addition to the attributes discussed above, there are four dimensions of sustainable development which ought to be considered and balanced while discussing sustainability of a community. These dimensions are Social, Economic, Ecological, and Political aspects of community which should be balanced in the progress of communities to be referred to as sustainable (UNESCO, 2010). This being affirmed, the concept of sustainability, though vague as stated at the beginning of this discussion, seems to be a little bit of inclined towards upholding the semantic attribute of making something continue to exist and to maintain balance in the continuum of existence in whatever sense of the term (UNESCO, 2002). Also, environmental, social and economic dimensions (*triple sustainability*) are evaluation areas in investigating sustainability of a community (López-Ridaura, et al., 2002). They are *pillars of sustainability* that must be considered in discussing sustainability of a community (Hansmann, Mieg, & Frischknecht, 2012).

Culture is an essential dimension of sustainable development. In line with this, UNESCO (2005) states “synergy between cultural diversity and biological diversity is a crucial factor for the preservation and balance of social and ecological systems”. Unlike the relevance of cultural aspects of sustainability, “Softer or fuzzy aspects of sustainable development such as cultural sustainability are poorly addressed” (Brandon and Lombardi, 2011). Edwards (2005) state that a sustainable community is one which values cultural diversity. This being the case, scholars also seem not to agree on what items should be taken as indicators to discuss the sustainability of a particular community with considerations of cultural values and perspectives. Socio-cultural sustainability should be addressed as appropriate instrument to “maintaining stability of social and cultural systems” (Rogers, Jalal, et al., 2008).

This is due to the significance of cultural values to “...enhance people’s ability to be agents of change, and their ability to question, challenge, propose and ultimately bring in new ways of doing things” (Daskon, 2010). This justifies a study and critical look into the socio-cultural situation of societies. With such rationale, the current study attempts to evaluate the sustainability of the Awra Amba community and claims of community sustainability with particular reference to socio-cultural sustainability of the community.

## 3. Methods and Procedures

This study adopts items developed as *criteria of significance* to measure and foresee social sustainability in different contexts. Unstructured interview is used to obtain information from the community leaders. Non-participant observation of the community based on inputs from related literatures is also employed. Last but not the least, focused group discussions are made among twenty four individuals in two rounds by gathering twelve individuals from the following production sectors of the community namely weaving centres, shopping centres, centre to take care of the old, and business centre based on purposive sampling in each round. Purposive selection is made to get well-motivated and highly self-expressive individuals who are recommended by the leaders of the community as good speakers on diverse matters.

## 4. Findings of the Study

The qualitative data generated in this study resulted in the summary presented hereunder:

### 4.1. Cultural Plurality

Cultural plurality is not encouraged at Awra Amba. The social-historical context of the formation of this community do not allow cultural plurality. For instance, Awra Amba has no religion. It is a community of faith without religion.

The people believe that there is one omnipotent creator of the universe but they have no attachment to specific rituals and religious institutions such as the church. In stead, they emphasize on the fact that they have to work. They believe that work should be done as an end in itself and everybody should be engaged in any type of work as far as he/she is capable of doing it irrespective of gender and other cultural-traditional barriers. Thus, anyone who resides in Awra Amba shall accept these principles as substitutes of religion. To attend to any religion will result in decision by the leaders of the community to leave the community for good. In this sense, cultural plurality is the shortfall of the community.

### 4.2. Solidarity

In view of the solidarity of the people, Awra Amba appears to have strong solidarity and connectedness from within. But, the community appears to be at stake when observed in a holistic approach. Awra Amba belongs to no established religion. In contrast, the community resides amidst Orthodox Christians and Muslims who surround them. The surrounding community has negative impression and attitude towards the Awra Amba. They are considered as Pagan, and as enemies. Related studies also show that the

community is ostracized by the surrounding people. This is another point that leaves the Awra Amba community at stake in view of the social-cultural and human sustainability.

The focus group discussions with members of the community shows that the neighbouring people are in hostile terms with Awra Amba mainly because of competition for land, in addition to the ideological competition in religion. This might be a threat to their security, the sustainability of their socio-cultural practices, and the continuation of their living style with their firm tenets of faith without praxis.

#### 4.3. Tolerance

For a community like Awra Amba, where every resource is shared equally among all members of the community, respect, compassion, patience and honesty come at the fore. The Awra Amba community built strong faith and believes in these principles as their life principles. Even when a lost property is found, there is a committee at Awra Amba which stood to identify to whom the property belongs and the person who claims ownership will be entitled to have the right to take the property. Children learn about honesty as the best policy since they start learning at schools. The community gives value to the properties that are produced by one's own effort. Both the focus group discussion and interviews with community leaders showed that the people take as their creed to live on what they produced. It is considered as disgrace to take the property and the "sweat" of others.

#### 4.4. Equality and Equity

One of the strong aspects of the Awra Amba community is its focus on equality and equity across gender. The strong point of sustainability of the community appears to come from equality. Among the Awra Ambans there is no traditional division of labour. Both males and females share equal burden. Unlike the practice in quite many regions of the country where cooking "injera" (traditional pan cake) and making "wat"(traditional sauce) is reserved only for women as their "natural obligation", both men and women cook injera and make wat- sharing responsibilities equally.

The leader of the community, Honorary Dr. Mr. Zumra Nuru, reported during an interview for this study that both men and women have equal rights and responsibilities to handle house chores and there is no particular responsibility assigned for a specific gender. He stated that men and women differ only in natural affairs such as bearing a child but the community takes as a principle that all human beings are equal and they are endowed with equal capacity to do things necessary to sustain life. There is no job assigned for particular gender in this community. Similarly, resources and incomes are shared equally among members of the family.

#### 4.5. Self-reliance and Economic Sustainability

In the light of the argument of the *triple sustainability approach*, sustainability shall be discussed in relation to social, economic and environmental aspects as well. This being the case, the economic sustainability of the Awra Amba is highly at stake. The community primarily depends on weaving. There are 467 households. Every strong man has to weave at the weaving centre and equally share the benefits with all other members of the community. The point that matters most here is the fact that the weavers are working all day long on traditional, sturdy machines and many of them reported kidney problems during a focus group discussion.

As an immediate solution, the community opted to transfer those suffering from health problems to take lighter jobs such as shop keeping and taking care of the old. However, because the community is a small community with limited number of individuals and many of them- as it is typical of African population, being teenagers- the economic sustainability of the community remains at stake. Another problem is the extent to which the community retains the highly skilled manpower.

Though the community succeeded to send the children and the youth to school, those students who succeeded to pass the national entrance examination to higher education institutions never return back to their community after their graduation. In most cases, this is attributed to lack of facilities and job opportunities as Awra Amba is a rural and isolated community. Thus, the economic sustainability of the community is at stake. Land is a scarce resource and the community has no sufficient land resource for farming. Small scale businesses and shopping characterize the community. But, these businesses seem hardly able to support the needy population.

#### 4.6. Justice, Accountability, Politics

Awra Amba is a self-dependent community. But, the community resides and is treated as part of the whole population in Amhara region, Northern part of Ethiopia. Thus, basically the community is governed by the rules, regulations and laws of the government. However, the community denies interaction with a person who will not abide by their rules, and traditional beliefs and principles. Thus, a person who takes a firm stand against the already established and shared rules such as working and living in a communal style and sharing profits equally among dwellers will be forced to leave the community, will be ex-communicated and in this sense the issue of justice and human rights needs further investigation.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 5.1. Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the findings above which lead to the implementation of the action points discussed at the end: Awra Amba is a small community found by a single man. It is described as an equalitarian society established for the sake of justice. But, the sustainability of the community is often contested. The researchers found out that the community has strong sides in

terms of gender equality, equity, solidarity from within and work ethic, as well. But, it is found out that the sustainability of the community is at stake. It is considered as pagan and foe by the surrounding community of Islam and Christianity followers. Moreover, the sustainability of the community is questioned because the means of income is not diversified. Individuals working at the weaving centres- the major source of income- are frequently experiencing kidney failures as they work on traditional, study machines all day long. The community doesn't allow any form of plurality especially in religion and related ideology, and this made the community isolated. Thus, no member of the surrounding community joins or gets married to the Awra Amba community. This implies that the community will be unable to sustain its very existence and its socio-cultural traits as well.

### 5.2. Recommendations

The study participants recommend that the community ought to be flexible and attract and interact with the surrounding communities in spite of differences in religion and other forms of life style. Moreover, income generation activities ought to be diversified and the regional government shall train members of the community so that they will be able to engage themselves in other means of livelihood. Further screening of the health status of individuals working in the weaving centres and a research into the actual cause of the reported kidney failures should be conducted.

Unless these issues are addressed, the community may not sustain its very existence in general and its socio-cultural practices in particular. Thus, the current state of affairs necessitate change to sustain socio-cultural ways of the community. The findings of the study also implicitly suggest the need to take measures by the regional government in respect to human rights, and socio-cultural sustainability of the community. Culture Bureau of the region should make efforts to sustain the life of the community, their cultural values, and social states of affairs in general.

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