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Contract and Control: Agrarian labour mobilisation and resistance under large-scale land investments for biofuel crop production in Ethiopia

Jonah Wedekind, Davide Chinigò

Abstract

This article explores the “agrarian question of labour” (AQ of labour) that is emerging in Ethiopia as part of a strategy of agricultural commercialisation present since the mid-2000s. We contribute to debates about the uneven character and open-ended trajectory of Ethiopia’s agrarian transformation, which is a state-led, investmentbased attempt at a transition from a largely rural, agrarian society and economy to an increasingly industrial one. The article addresses why and how agricultural commercialisation failed in the case of two overlapping and nearly identical agricultural investment projects in Hararghe and Wolaita that were financed by interlinked multinational financial groups and facilitated by the state for the production and processing of the biofuel crop castor. The state’s contractual incorporation of smallholders into these poorly planned and financially extractive large-scale land investments was met with various forms of resistance which contributed to the failure of the projects. The article points to the centrality of an unresolved agrarian question of labour as a source of tension in Ethiopia’s agrarian transformation. While literature conceptualises agricultural commercialisation in Ethiopia through a dichotomous model – state support to smallholder farming in the country’s highlands, and investment-led, large- scale commercialisation in the lowlands – in this article we emphasise the importance of contract-farming (CF) as a third mode of agricultural commercialisation. CF relies on the incorporation of smallholders, including their landholdings and labour-power, into large-scale land investment projects via out-grower schemes. This article shows that CF gained political momentum over the course of the 2000s as a commercialisation model that facilitates investments in smallholder farming (i. e. through commercialising their productive activities) without necessitating rapid changes in the agrarian social structure (i. e. by inhibiting rapid social differentiation and land dispossession of smallholders). The strategic rationale of CF was to regulate the swelling of a land-detached labour force (i. e. a precarious and politically dangerous stratum), should agro-industrial growth not proceed at a pace sufficient to absorb that force (i. e. provide employment outside smallholder agriculture). Empirically, the article relies on ethnographic fieldwork addressing the trajectories of investor-operated and state-mediated CF for castor over the course of a decade (mid-2000s to mid-2010s) in the East/West Hararghe zones of the Oromia Region and in the Wolaita zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Region (SNNPR). Through the agency of near identical ad hoc investment companies – Flora EcoPower (FEP) in Hararghe and Global Energy Ethiopia (GEE) in Wolaita operating for about a decade since 2005 – Ethiopia’s development planners hoped that these two peripheries, which were characterised by high labour-to-land ratios, land degradation and labour out-migration, would see the commercialisation and improvement of smallholder production and livelihoods. The two case studies combined reveal that, firstly, top-down planning and implementation of CF, and the processes of subversion and resistance this engendered, played a crucial role in the ultimate failure of the investment projects. It shows that agricultural commercialisation, based on the state’s coercive contractual incorporation of smallholders into large-scale land deals, can lead to a backlash that undermines the state’s development(al) strategies. Secondly, the legacy that the failure of the projects left behind, added fuel to an already politicised fire surrounding the labour question, i. e. the extent to which the attempted agricultural transformation to commercialised agro-industrial production can sufficiently diversify incomes and offer employment opportunities to offset social ills and political grievances. Thirdly, the two cases of CF reveal the same land and labour exploitative logic behind investments that prioritise quick returns over long-term planning and thereby disregard the local socio-economic and ecological conditions in which they intervene. Despite their specificities, we conclude that the two cases cast a shadow on the ostensive capacity of the Ethiopian state to mitigate the adversities and contradictions of investment-based, state-mediated agricultural commercialisation through CF. Beside the economic significance of failed agricultural investment projects, the protests that followed silent subversions in Wolaita and Hararghe marked an additional point of rupture in the relationship between government and farmers. This is particularly significant as, since the EPRDF came to power in the 1990s, the leadership has always capitalised on smallholders’ support as a central social constituency.

Résumé

Cet article explore la question du travail agraire qui émerge avec la stratégie de développement d’une agriculture commerciale en Éthiopie au milieu des années 2000. Il discute l’inégale transformation agricole éthiopienne dont la trajectoire future reste ouverte. Cette transformation, menée par l’État et fondée sur l’investissement tente de faire passer l’Éthiopie d’une société rurale à l’économie principalement agraire vers une société industrielle. L’article s’intéresse au pourquoi et au comment de l’échec de l’agriculture commerciale à partir de deux cas similaires de projets d’investissement agricole dans le Haraghe et le Wolayta. Ces projets ont été financés par des groupes financiers multinationaux interconnectés et facilités par l’État pour transformer le ricin afin de produire du bio-carburant. L’intégration contractuelle par l’État de petits exploitants dans ces investissements fonciers à grande échelle mal planifiés et

financièrement extractifs s'est heurtée à diverses formes de résistance qui ont contribué à l'échec des projets. L'article souligne le caractère central de la question non résolue du travail agraire, à l'origine des tensions qui traversent la transformation agricole éthiopienne. La littérature scientifique conçoit l'agriculture commerciale en Éthiopie selon un modèle dichotomique, avec d'un côté le soutien aux petits exploitants agricoles orchestré par l'État sur les hauts-plateaux, et de l'autre l'agriculture commerciale à grande échelle et portée par l'investissement dans les basses-terres. Cet article met a contrario l'accent sur l'importance de l'agriculture sous contrat comme troisième voie de la commercialisation agricole. L'agriculture sous contrat repose sur l'intégration des exploitants – à la fois de leur propriété agricole et de leur force de travail – dans des projets d'investissement foncier à grande échelle par le biais de programmes de sous-traitance. Comme le montre l'article, l'agriculture contractuelle a bénéficié d'un réel élan politique au cours des années 2000. Ce mode de commercialisation facilite en effet l'investissement dans les petites exploitations agricoles (c'est-à-dire la commercialisation de leurs produits) et ne nécessite pas de changements rapides de la structure sociale agraire (il empêche une transformation rapide de la stratification sociale et la dépossession des petits exploitants). La stratégie de l'agriculture commerciale était de réguler le potentiel surcroît d'une main-d'oeuvre privée de terre (une couche précaire et politiquement dangereuse), dans le cas où la croissance agro-industrielle ne progresserait pas au rythme nécessaire pour l'absorber (c'est-à-dire fournir des emplois en dehors de la petite agriculture). L'article s'appuie sur des données qualitatives issues d'une enquête ethnographique portant sur les trajectoires d'accords commerciaux sur le ricin. Ces accords, pilotés par les investisseurs et arbitrés par l'État, ont été étudiés pendant une décennie (du milieu des années 2000 au milieu des années 2010) dans les zones Est/ Ouest du Hararghe de la région Oromia et dans la zone du Wolaita de la région des nations, nationalités et peuples du Sud (SNNPR). Les planificateurs du développement de l'Éthiopie espéraient que l'intervention de ces sociétés d'investissement ad hoc presque identiques – Flora EcoPower (FEP) dans le Hararghe et Global Energy Ethiopia (GEE) dans le Wolaita, en activité depuis une dizaine d'années au moment de l'enquête – conduirait à la commercialisation, l'amélioration de la production et des moyens de subsistance des petits exploitants de ces deux espaces périphériques, caractérisés par un ratio main-d'oeuvre/ terre élevé, la dégradation des terres et l'exode des travailleurs. La combinaison des deux études de cas révèle premièrement que la planification et la mise en oeuvre descendantes de l'agriculture contractuelle ont engendré des processus de subversion et de résistance de la part des exploitants. L'ensemble a joué un rôle crucial dans l'échec final des projets d'investissement. L'intégration coercitive par l'État de petits exploitants, via des contrats, dans des transactions foncières à grande échelle, a été la politique adoptée pour promouvoir l'agriculture commerciale. Or elle a entraîné un retour de bâton qui mine les stratégies de l'État développemental. Deuxièmement, l'héritage que l'échec des projets a laissé derrière lui a attisé la question, déjà politisée, du travail. Il s'agit en effet de savoir dans quelle mesure la tentative de transformation de l'agriculture en production agro-industrielle commerciale peut diversifier les revenus et offrir des possibilités d'emploi pour pallier aux problèmes sociaux et répondre aux revendications politiques. Troisièmement, les deux cas d'agriculture contractuelle rendent compte d'une même logique d'exploitation de la terre et du travail qui sous-tend des investissements privilégiant des rendements rapides aux dépens d'une planification à long terme, négligeant ainsi les conditions socio-économiques et écologiques locales dans lesquelles ils interviennent. Au-delà de leurs spécificités, ces deux cas font douter de la capacité supposée de l'État éthiopien à réduire les inconvénients et les contradictions de l'agriculture commerciale basée sur les investissements et organisée par l'État par le biais de contrats avec les petits exploitants. Outre le poids économique de ces projets d'investissement agricole qui ont échoué, les protestations qui ont suivi les résistances silencieuses dans le Wolaita et le Hararghe ont marqué un point de rupture supplémentaire dans les relations entre le gouvernement et les agriculteurs. C'est particulièrement significatif dans la mesure où depuis l'arrivée au pouvoir de l'EPRDF dans les années 1990, les dirigeants ont toujours pu compter sur le soutien du groupe social des petits exploitants comme base électorale.

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scale commercialisation in the lowlands – in this article we emphasise the importance of contract-farming (CF) as a third mode of agricultural commercialisation. CF relies on the incorporation of smallholders, including their landholdings and labour-power, into large-scale land investment projects via out-grower schemes. This article shows that CF gained political momentum over the course of the 2000s as a commercialisation model that facilitates investments in smallholder farming (i.e. through commercialising their productive activities) without necessitating rapid changes in the agrarian social structure (i.e. by inhibiting rapid social differentiation and land dispossession of smallholders). The strategic rationale of CF was to regulate the swelling of a land-detached labour force (i.e. a precarious and politically dangerous stratum), should agro-industrial growth not proceed at a pace sufficient to absorb that force (i.e. provide employment outside smallholder agriculture).

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Keywords: Agricultural commercialisation, contract farming, land investments, agrarian question of labour, biofuels, Hararghe, Wolaita, Ethiopia

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Au-delà de leurs spécificités, ces deux cas font douter de la capacité supposée de l'État éthiopien à réduire les inconvénients et les contradictions de l'agriculture commerciale basée sur les investissements et organisée par l'État par le biais de contrats avec les petits exploitants. Outre le poids économique de ces projets d'investissement agricole qui ont échoué, les protestations qui ont suivi les résistances silencieuses

dans le Wolaita et le Hararghe ont marqué un point de rupture supplémentaire dans les relations entre le gouvernement et les agriculteurs. C'est particulièrement significatif dans la mesure où depuis l'arrivée au pouvoir de l'EPRDF dans les années 1990, les dirigeants ont toujours pu compter sur le soutien du groupe social des petits exploitants comme base électorale.

Mots-clés : commerce agricole, agriculture contractuelle, investissements fonciers, question du travail agraire, biocarburants, Hararge, Wolaita, Éthiopie

1. Introduction

This article explores the agrarian question of labour (AQ of labour) emerging in Ethiopia as part of a strategy of agricultural commercialisation since the mid-2000s. Drawing on two case studies of biofuel crop production through contract farming (CF) in Hararghe and Wolaita, we contribute to debates about the uneven character and open-ended trajectory of Ethiopia's agrarian transformation: a state-led, investment-based attempt at a transition from a largely rural, agrarian society and economy to an increasingly industrial one.

Questions of land control, access, and use in Ethiopia have been widely studied and debated after the influx of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in land since the mid-2000s. Meanwhile, related questions concerning changes to Ethiopia's labour structure have emerged as economically and politically sensitive. Yet, labour questions have received little attention in relation to the land rush in Ethiopia. The same is true for CF, despite research finding that one of "the government's preferred option[s] is for investors in smallholder areas to establish outgrower schemes in the expectation that investor capital can be combined with the land and labour of smallholders" (Lavers, 2012b: 813). Following this, we place an agrarian labour perspective at the centre of our analysis (see Li, 2011) and consider the strategic role of CF (see Oya, 2012) under state-facilitated land investments in Ethiopia.

We argue that complementary to large-scale FDIs in land, CF gained political momentum to facilitate investments in smallholder farming (i.e. commercialise their productive activities) without necessitating rapid changes in the agrarian social structure (i.e. inhibit rapid smallholder differentiation and dispossession). The strategic rationale of CF, which from a labour perspective we analyse through the prism of petty commodity production (Bernstein, 2004a), was to regulate the swelling of a land-detached labour force (i.e. a precarious and politically dangerous stratum), should agro-industrial growth not proceed at a pace sufficient to absorb it (i.e. provide employment outside smallholder agriculture).

2. Ethiopia's agricultural commercialisation strategy

Since the mid-2000s, Ethiopia's ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), embarked on a strategy of selective liberalisation, where the state facilitates and regulates private investments in the economy (Chinigò & Fantini, 2015). Central to this strategy—in the face of rising global food and fuel prices and a rush for land ca. 2007/2008—the Ethiopian state opened up to FDIs in land and agriculture for the first time since the EPRDF had assumed state power between 1991 and 1994 (Dessalegn Rahmato, 2011). This was a significant shift in strategy considering the *longue durée* of smallholder farming in Ethiopia (see McCann, 1995). It also signified a partial departure from smallholder-focused agricultural policies that were promoted in the first decade of EPRDF rule (1995-2005). Most notably, this included the policy of Agricultural Development-led Industrialisation (ADLI), which failed to substantially expand smallholder productivity and shift surpluses (capital and labour) to nurture rapid agro-industrial growth as envisioned by the EPRDF leadership (Lavers, 2012a). Yet, the continuous centrality of the state in attracting, facilitating, and regulating unprecedented levels of FDIs, and thereby seeking to maintain autonomy over the development process, underscored the EPRDF's commitment to a developmental state (Clapham, 2017). Particularly, the socialist property regime of state ownership of land, established by the Derg's radical land reform of 1975, provided the Ethiopian government with leverage to spatially plan large-scale agricultural land investments.

However, a challenge of the shift in strategy from a primarily smallholder-based to an increasingly investment-friendly path towards agro-industrial growth was about how to capture and control a growing *relative* surplus labour population, which the liberalisation of the agricultural sector potentially generated. The EPRDF leadership was thus confronted with the real possibility of FDIs in land inflicting significant changes to the hitherto smallholder dominated social structure should rural social differentiation and land dispossession take place, pick up pace, and not be controlled or at least compensated. This was indeed a pressing challenge, not only because large-scale land investments were legitimised as providing employment opportunities, but also because compounding growth of a surplus labour population—a reserve of a land-less and/or wage-less people—could be potentially politically dangerous. The situational irony, that enabling radical change to the social smallholder structure from above could, in the long run, undermine the party's own political support base from below was not lost on the EPRDF leadership—not least on late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi (De Waal, 2012; Lefort, 2013[1]).

Literature understands agricultural commercialisation in Ethiopia through a geographically dichotomous model of centre-periphery relations (Dessalegn Rahmato, 2011; Fouad Makki, 2012). This relies on a consolidated historiography characterising state formation in Ethiopia as proceeding from the highland centres and expanding to integrate and control frontier spaces, societies, and resources in highland peripheries and lowland peripheries (Markakis, 2011). Accordingly, in highland areas, where EPRDF support has been historically based on smallholders, the state retained elements of ADLI aimed at increasing smallholder productivity, but pursued a range of mechanisms to commercialise their subsistence-oriented or vernacular activities and link them to formal commodity markets[2]. In the country's lowland peripheries, commercialisation was pursued through significant injections of capital by both foreign and domestic investors. Here, the state attracted and facilitated investors by making supposedly "unused" land available cheaply at a large scale, primarily for labour-intensive plantation type production. Government-identified "priority crops" for investment-based plantation farming were to allow for agro-industrial synergies. These included flori- and horticulture, cotton, sugar, and biodiesel crops, such as jatropha and castor (the latter of which we shall lay our focus on).

Here, we wish to emphasise a third, often relatively overlooked, mode of agricultural commercialisation that was pursued by the EPRDF since the mid-2000s which combined the two, supposedly bifurcated, commercial production systems discussed above. This third mode is based on incorporating smallholders, including their landholdings and labour-power, into large-scale land investment projects through outgrower schemes. Our case studies focus on two such agricultural investment projects that combined large-scale plantations with smallholder outgrowers for the agro-industrial production of the biofuel crop castor in Hararghe and Wolaita. But before we proceed to present the cases, the next section will first conceptualise and contextualise the relevance of CF under FDIs in agriculture.

[1] Meles identified smallholders as EPRDF's support base: "There is no village that I know of in the rural areas that did not vote for us. [...] We built the structures in rural areas during the armed struggle" (Meles Zenawi cited in Dowden, 2012). Nevertheless, he envisioned that "when [the developmental state] has done its job it will undermine its own social base, to be replaced by a social democratic or liberal democratic coalition" (Meles Zenawi cited in De Waal, 2012: 155). [2] Including cooperatives, private-public partnerships and CF, all of which may involve FDI.

3. A Petty Answer to a Laborious Question

We analyse the significance of CF in relation to Ethiopia's agricultural commercialisation strategy through the prism of petty commodity production. Henry Bernstein (2004a: 128-134) defined this type of production as a structural outcome of incomplete transitions to agrarian capitalism in Africa (and elsewhere in the global South), whereby rural dwellers are forced to seek their socio-economic reproduction at the intersection of globalised patterns of capital accumulation in agriculture while relying on access to land to sustain their livelihoods. We argue that the imposition of CF arrangements constitutes a moment when smallholder land and labour is captured via global commodity markets. Michael Watts contends that "contract production is a form of petty commodity production with a distinctive labour process" under which smallholders provide not only access to land but serve as "disguised wage-labour equivalents" (Watts, 1992a: 82-83). Contracts between investors and smallholders, often mediated by the state, "control work conditions in a manner that renders household labour in effect unfree [...] in the sense that it is directly distributed, exploited and retained by politico-legal mechanisms." Thereby, "nominally independent growers retain the illusion of autonomy but have become in practice [...] workers cultivating crops on private allotments" (Watts, 1992b: 83[3]). Where states force smallholders into unequal power, property and production relations with investors, this may indicate "authoritarian and despotic" types of contracting which are often resisted or subverted by smallholders and may then be prone to failure (*ibid.*).

Agrarian transformation in Africa is generally characterised by incomplete processes of structural change from largely rural, agrarian societies and economies into increasingly urban, industrial ones (Bernstein, 2016). When "truncated," such transformation processes generate a fragmented and footloose[4] labour force as "the anticipated transition from the farm to factory has not taken place, and is nowhere on the horizon" (Li, 2011: 281). Structural Adjustment Programmes since the 1970s and market-led agricultural commercialisation accelerated processes of depeasantisation. That is, "the erosion of an agrarian way of life," which relies on land access and combines "subsistence and commodity agricultural production with an internal social organisation based on family labour" (Bryceson, 1999: 175, 2018). The consequence was an unprecedented "exodus of surplus rural labour to urban slums" in the global

[3] In the case of Ethiopia, smallholders hold usufruct rights to land which is owned by the state. [4] Fragmented and footloose labour refers to strata that may be fully or partly free (i.e. dispossessed) from land. They "pursue their means of reproduction across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, as well as wage employment and self-employment," both in informal and formal labour markets (Bernstein, 2004a: 6).

South which lack sufficient (in)formal housing and employment opportunities and, therefore, bear potential for social resistance and pose a threat to the authority and legitimacy of state power holders (Davis, 2006: 15).

Bernstein is skeptical that this problem poses a land question, which can be perennially answered with new rounds of redistributive land reforms that repossess the dispossessed. The type of politics that heralded peasant wars and land to the tiller movements in the 20th century (Wolf, 1990)—including in Ethiopia (see Gebru Tareke, 1996; Young, 1997)—are far from being ideologically hegemonic or on the policy agendas of African states today. Rather, the last two decades saw the emergence of a new land rush by foreign investors, often facilitated by states, only to aggravate the rural exodus of surplus labour (Li, 2011). The AQ of labour is central to understanding present-day agrarian transformations in Africa. The question asks, if and how the state can strategically harness FDIs to pursue a national agrarian transformation that enables (agro)industrial growth to a scale that it may absorb surplus labour and avoid political grievances generated by agricultural commercialisation (Bernstein, 2004b; see Watts, 2009).

Ethiopia represents a seemingly exceptional case to test the AQ of labour with an eye on the strategy of agrarian commercialisation. The case counterposes Agro-Afro-pessimist tropes, which suggest that state-led agrarian transformations are rarely attempted by policymakers in Africa and are hardly possible under globalisation today (Oya, 2010). The EPRDF's early adoption of a developmental approach to pursue structural change stands in stark contrast to market-led approaches in other African states (Stiglitz, 2002). But even in Ethiopia, where the state retains a degree of policy autonomy and seeks synergies between agriculture and (agro)industry, state-led agricultural commercialisation may well inflict a rapid and radical rupture in the social structure that cannot be ignored. The AQ of labour seems to have only recently emerged as a source of tension in Ethiopia. Over the first decade of its rule, state ownership of land allowed the EPRDF to avoid dealing with the social ills of urbanisation (Fassil Demissie, 2008) and unemployment (Eyob Balcha Gebremariam, 2017). But in 2005, urban uprisings following controversial elections, signaled that social discontent, rooted in rural stasis and exodus, had to be addressed (Lefort, 2007).

The shift to an investment-driven strategy of agricultural commercialisation after 2005 only intensified contradictions of increasing agricultural productivity while regulating social differentiation, land dispossession, and rural-to-urban migration (Lefort, 2010). Rural and urban policies were implemented by the EPRDF to securitise development (Fana Gebresenbet, 2014). For example, Agricultural Extension Programmes inhibited differentiation and dispossession by recruiting a "meagre elite of farmers [...] as 'model farmers', and as vanguard party members [with] support of the public authorities," but leaving their peers, "the mass of 'poor farmers,'" to the fate of market forces (Lefort, 2012: 682-683).

We argue that the emergence of CF, as a type of commercialised agricultural production, reflects one of the EPRDF's attempts to defer (if not partially answer) the AQ of labour. In Ethiopia, CF advances petty commodity production as a "third way" between plantation and smallholder farming in the drive to commercialise agriculture. In the course of the 2000s, Ethiopia's development planners saw CF as an opportunity to facilitate FDIs in agriculture and to exploit the land and labour of smallholders without this leading to their direct dispossession.

4. Comparable Cases

The global biofuel boom provided the Ethiopian government with opportunities to harness FDIs in order to pursue synergies between agriculture and industry. Adopting a Biofuel Development and Utilization Strategy, the Ethiopian government encouraged both plantation and/or outgrower production of sugarcane and processing of bioethanol, as well as the production of spurge crops, like jatropha and castor, to process biodiesel. Here, we explore two investment projects intended to produce/process castor (*ricinus communis*), through combined plantation and contract farming. Although situated in different agro-ecological settings, the two projects had comparable property and production arrangements as well as similar developmental outcomes. Contrasting the two cases studies allows us to tease out the (generalised) risks and contradictions of CF as a mode of investment-funded and state-facilitated agricultural commercialisation and their (comparable) trajectories in different socio-economic and ecological settings. Bringing the cases together, furthermore, reveals that castor represented a boom crop subject to a veritable frenzy of biofuel investments in Ethiopia between 2005 and 2010, some of which were (financially) inter-linked and/or had remarkably similar production models, and all of which turned out to be failed projects (Dawit Alemu, 2013).

The case studies of the two companies, Flora EcoPower (FEP) and Global Energy Ethiopia (GEE), thus trace the trajectories of investor-operated and state-mediated CF for castor over the course of a decade (mid-2000s to mid-2010s) in the East/West Hararghe zones of Oromia Region and in the Wolaita zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) respectively. Through the agency of nearly identical investment companies, operating in different spaces and commencing at slightly varying times (FEP from 2006 to 2011 in East/West Hararghe and GEE from 2007 to 2012 in Wolaita), Ethiopia's development planners hoped that two peripheries—characterised by high labour-to-land ratios, land degradation and labour out-migration—would see the commercialisation and improvement of smallholder production and livelihoods. By reconstructing the failures of both projects and indicating the links between them, we consider the implications of their break-down in relation to the state's strategic attempt to respond to the AQ of labour.

Empirically, our research relied on qualitative methods based on extended ethnographic case studies. This included the collection of project reports and government communiques, conducting participant observation, as well as interviews and focus groups discussion with various actors across the biofuel value chain, such as officials situated at all levels of the federal government's chain of command (federal, regional, zone, *woreda*, *kebele*). Fieldwork in Hararghe was conducted between 2012 and 2014 and in Wolaita between 2010 and 2012. While we have published findings of both case studies elsewhere (see Chinigò, 2015a; Wedekind, 2021), this article points at the urgency of critical research to map out the ramifications of land investments beyond context specific case studies to assess broader trends across space and time.

5. Flora EcoPower in Hararghe

The East/West Hararghe zones of Oromia Region appear unlikely areas for large-scale land investments. A World Bank (Milas & Aynaoui 2004: 11) report labels the zones as "high risk, low potential" investment spaces, cautioning that its topography "creates problems for inhabitants in terms of [...] access to communities, towns and markets" and that its population-to-land ratio results in low agricultural productivity. While Hararghe is indeed characterised by various pressures on land, the report fails to acknowledge the vernacular property, production, and trade relations that animate Hararghe's rural economy.

Hararghe's highlands, inhabited predominantly by Oromo smallholders, are indeed faced with ever smaller land-to-labour ratios (Storck *et al.*, 1991), described as "latent landlessness" (Belay Kassa & Manig, 2004). A combination of droughts, population growth and land degradation, linked to customary land inheritance institutions maintained under the state land tenure system, leads to recurrent land conflicts (Nigusie Angessa Bedasa & Jeylan Wolyie Hussein, 2018). But in the face of such adversities, smallholders developed intricate inter-cropping practices and diversified their incomes through the petty production and trade of *khat*, alongside cash crops like groundnuts and multi-purpose staple crops such as sorghum, to ensure household reproduction (Ezekiel Gebissa, 2010). Hararghe's smallholders have gradually reduced coffee production in favour of *khat* production since the 1900s, to avoid state taxation and tenure reforms under previous political regimes (Ezekiel Gebissa, 2004). With *khat* production and its inter-regional contraband trade buzzing, the state struggles to incur taxes from the narco-trade (Anderson *et al.*, 2007), while farmers resist agricultural extension services that seek to replace its production (Cochrane & O'Reagan, 2016).

Hararghe's slopes, descending south from the Harar plateau, are inhabited by both smallholders and agro-pastoralists, "practising agriculture using Oromo farming techniques but possessing Somali social institutions" (Ezekiel Gebissa, 2004: 36). The lowlands, further south, are inhabited by Somali groups, active as pastoralists, herders, traders, and transporters between the commercial hubs Harar, Dire Dawa and Jijiga (Ollivier, 1995). Somali pastoralists are likewise faced with diverse pressures on land and have historically clashed with Oromo smallholders in Hararghe over access to land (Braukämper, 1982-1983). Under the EPRDF pastoralists have been subjected to stately sedentarisation efforts and caught in crossfires of inter-regional conflicts between rivalling political elites and militias over the borderlands and resources of the Oromia and Somali Regional States (Asnake Kefale, 2010). These dynamics, then, constitute Hararghe's long-standing status as a frontier that is unevenly and contingently integrated into the political-economic fabric of Ethiopia's central state.

However unlikely this frontier may seem for large-scale investments to produce castor, Hararghe was already identified by foreign agronomic consultants to Ethiopia's Imperial Government in the 1960s as a suitable setting for castor production, processing, and export (Miller *et al.*, 1969). Castor is an indigenous crop to Hararghe known as *qobbo* (Afan Oromo) or *gulo* (Amharic) and used for inter-cropping, fencing, etc. (Azene Bekele-Tesemma, 2007). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that with the Ethiopian state's opening to FDIs, in 2006 investors from Israel, namely the Hovev Group, identified Hararghe as an area for castor production during the global biofuel boom. Their selected setting conveniently overlapped with the Ethiopian government's own "suitability maps" that identified large areas for biofuel crop production (castor, jatropha, sugar, etc.). Yet, these maps often failed to factor in actually existing land-use practices on the ground (Nalepa *et al.*, 2016).

After setting up the company Flora EcoPower Plc and acquiring an investment license in Ethiopia, as well as attracting capital from shareholders in Germany, the Hovev Group negotiated with the Oromia Regional State to lease at least 10,000 hectares (ha) of land in East Hararghe's highlands. As shown in detail elsewhere (see Wedekind, 2021), despite pressures from federal and regional officials to make land available accordingly, local level officials insisted that land was not sufficiently available in the rural highlands. A compromise with two overarching production "options" was then worked out.

One option was to integrate a minimum of 7,000 smallholders into the project as outgrowers (FEP, 2007a). Based on the assumption that each household, on average, held 1 ha of land, this served to provide the company with indirect access to initially ca. 7,000 ha of land. This would allow FEP to gain control of the labour of each household working this land. Another option was to make "government land" available in East Hararghe's lowlands, which was regarded by officials as "unused" bushland or occupied by "unproductive" pastoralists. Some 8,000 ha of scattered plots were thus made immediately available for clearance, while future land concessions and contract arrangements with smallholders in West Hararghe were promised, should the project proceed productively.

With a start-up capital of ca. 13 million euros from international shareholders (FEP Holding AG München, 2006) and a 15 million ETB[5] loan from Ethiopia's Nib International Bank, an oil factory was established in the village of Fechatu, Fadis *woreda* (Nib International Bank S.C., 2007). Centrally located between the Hararghe highlands and lowlands to function as an oil processing plant, it was to ensure constant throughput of castor produced by smallholders and on plantations. From here processed oil would be shipped via Djibouti to the international market. The production model[6], dubbed "community farming" by FEP, was welcomed by high ranking officials despite muted concerns from low-ranking government experts over smallholder food security[7]. Late PM Meles Zenawi himself attended the factory inauguration and during a televised tour of the facilities one FEP manager explained to him that, "[o]ur philosophy at FEP is to integrate ourselves in the local community[8]."

Backed by high ranking officials, local government extension workers (EWs) partnered with FEP-hired agronomists to mass-mobilise smallholders in the highland *woreda* for CF. Meanwhile, they also began clearing "bushland[9]" and hiring local wage labour to initiate plantation production. One former zone level official recalled the following:

> Even though the communities welcomed investments in their marginalised areas, it was difficult to convince them to grow this castor crop. Why *qobbo*? They were sceptical of our limited knowledge about this oil crop [...] and said that for them the multiple uses of sorghum are far beyond anything the central government or Flora [FEP] can imagine[10].

The difficulty of convincing smallholders revolved not only around the value and utility of castor, but lay in the fact that FEP's contracts compelled farmers to give up producing crops other than castor on their landholdings. To ensure that mobilisation of farmers proceeded, the regional government

[5] The Ethiopian Birr (ETB) was valued between 1 USD = 8,72 ETB on 1 January 2006 to 1 USD = 9,24 ETB on 31 December 2007. [6] Referred to as a "nucleus-estate model" in agronomy. [7] Interview with official, Agricultural Investment Land Administration Agency, Addis Ababa, July 2014. [8] For a video, see Achour, 2012. [9] Land clearance in Fadis, Midegha and Babile *woreda*, parts of which (illegally) encroached within the borders of the Babile Elephant Sanctuary, caused FEP to be accused of land grabbing. [10] Interview with former official, East Hararghe Zone Investment Office, Harar, October 2013.

ordered compulsory training workshops to be held, which smallholders had to attend via their peasant associations. Here, FEP agronomists provided "scientific proof" to explain that FEP's castor variety, imported from China and India, were "super crops" with superior yields to indigenous varieties and higher income potentials than local cash crops. Under pressure from regional state officials and FEP's claims of potential castor yields of up to 50 quintal (q) per hectare annually (for which up to 40 ETB/q plus start-up bonuses and subsidised fertilisers would be paid), local *woreda* officials pushed farmers to agree to the conditions of a "collaborative agreement," drafted mainly by FEP and sanctioned by the Oromia Cooperative Promotion Commission.

The immediate effect of the CF scheme was a mass shift from inter-cropping sorghum, groundnuts, and *khat* to mono-cropping castor. Smallholders thereby lost autonomy over their land-use practices (i.e. who produces what, when, where and how). This also eroded moral economies based on vernacular trade relations (e.g. with *khat* and groundnut traders) and reciprocal, customary institutions such as communal labour- and land-sharing (*guza*). Under FEP, incorporated households were now dependent on contractual payments or extra-labour wages from nearby plantations. Contracts not only brought segments of Hararghe's smallholders under tighter state control, but effectively transformed them into a labour force tied to land and compelled to produce according to contractual time and plan.

In the first year of mobilisation, the number of contracted farmers increased rapidly from 700 initially to 5,300 by the end of 2007 who held 3,200 ha in total in the *woreda* of Fadis, Babille and Midega Tola (FEP, 2007b). By year two, CF expanded to all *woreda* in East Hararghe, with FEP reportedly distributing castor seeds to over 13,800 farmers by the first quarter of 2008 and commencing in seven other *woreda* in West Hararghe. Yet, in a letter to Oromia Regional offices, FEP manager complained that despite mobilising 60,000 outgrowers by the end of 2008, the amount of land cultivated with castor by smallholders amounted to 17,000 ha only (FEP, 2008). Average land holding sizes of contracted households were evidently smaller than FEP had anticipated. The emphasis on the scale of land cultivated through CF furthermore reveals a drive by FEP to grab land virtually, via the proxy of CF. Further indications for this are company PR statements which present land held under CF as "company land" in an effort to boast the assets FEP held in Ethiopia (e.g. land size, contracted farmers, agro-industrial infrastructure, working relations with government, etc.), with the aim of attracting new shareholders.

In reality, hybrid castor yielded far less than FEP had projected. This became apparent at the worst time possible as high inflations in food and currency hit Ethiopia in late 2007 and throughout 2008 (Assefa Admassie, 2014). FEP's management failed to react by adequately increasing the prices paid for castor or allowing the resumption of other food and cash crops. Castor yields were often ten times less than FEP has promised[11]. Since farmers were paid per quintal, FEP's payments were so low that the number of farmers who struggled to ensure food security rose just as food and currency inflation hit rural areas[12].

By year three, working relations between company agronomists and government officials had soured, while contracted smallholders lost trust and turned against both parties. Exploiting the huge scale and disorganisation of FEP's operations, farmers increasingly resisted company agronomists and subversion of contract agreements became common. A former head of East Hararghe's zone office recalled the following:

> One day Mr. Hovev came into my office, shouting "we have a problem, the farmers are not cooperating." I inquired and found out, our farmers tricked FEP in many ways, unimaginable! Some manipulated the weight of castor at the factory gate, to get better payments; some registered with FEP under a different name, to get paid double; some grew fences of castor, to grow traditional crops behind them, khat and so on[13].

Besides resistance, formal complaints were also made by some farmers and/or representative organisations (e.g. the Afran Qallo Farmers' Cooperative) not only to their respective elders and peasant associations, but also directly to administrators at *woreda* and zone levels. Aware of manifold grievances by smallholders (some of whom they were related to or neighbours of), local officials faced a dilemma of reporting the problems up the chain of command, from the top of which (i.e. from regional and federal levels) pressure to support the company continued to emanate downwards. At local level, it was apparent that the project risked undermining the state's rationale for promoting CF as part of its development strategy. But grievances and resistances of contracted farmers, while they undermined FEP's operations and the imaginaries of developmental policies, were not solely responsible for the project spiralling out of control by early 2009. Low castor output and insufficient oil processing and export rates also caused deteriorating relations between FEP's management in Ethiopia and international shareholders[14]. Spending the majority of its start-up capital on plantation and factory infrastructures, salaries, agricultural inputs and mass-mobilisation efforts, FEP's operational capital dried up. The Hovev Group abandoned the project and

[11] Focus group discussion with former FEP Agronomists, Harar, October 2013 and October 2014. [12] Interview with official at East Hararghe Social Affairs Administration Office, Harar, June 2014. [13] Interview with former official, East Hararghe Zone Administration, Addis Ababa, October 2014. [14] Share prices were already down, following negative press coverage that FEP faced after the Hovevs had encroached on land in the Babile Elephant Sanctuary.

abruptly left Ethiopia in early 2009—leaving behind a dysfunctional project, outstanding salaries to local staff, daily labourers and outgrowers, and debts with Ethiopian banks.

However, this was by no means the end of FEP. Indeed, as Tania Murray-Li (2018: 328) reminds us, it is crucial to examine precisely "what happens *after* the land grab." FEP's exit was a blow to farmers who had worked to contract. Zone officials report that hundreds of contract farmers requested government support[15]. Numbers of households relying on the mid-term Productive Safety Net Programme in East/West Hararghe increased as company failure and inflation combined (Canali & Slaviero, 2010). Distressed asset sales and migration from the countryside to nearby towns due to the search for work were also common[16]. Latent land conflicts between Hararghe's highland and lowland populations, moreover, intensified as hard-hit smallholders tried to access more land (e.g. idle plantation land in the lowlands) to put under intensive staple crop production. Though seemingly a minority, a number of poorer affected households gave up their landholdings entirely by vacating precious farmland, which neighbours or more affluent and/or influential smallholders, in turn, sought to occupy and claim as their property to use. Elders and local state officials, depending on their position and influence, struggled to regulate such processes of informal property-making, borne out of the economic vacuum that FEP left behind and the erosion of state legitimacy. Not only was this a classic fuel vs. food case, but one that—due to its authoritarian and despotic type of contracting—aggravated precisely those social ills of FDI in land (smallholder differentiation and dispossession) that the Ethiopia state had strategically calculated could be mitigated and managed through CF.

6. Castor Clones

The life-history of FEP did not end here, however. Elements of the project re-emerged in different shapes and forms in Hararghe as well as in other spatial and temporal settings of Ethiopia, as we shall see in the case of GEE. In fact, FEP's foreign shareholders sent a crisis manager to Ethiopia in 2010/2011 in a bid to salvage remaining assets (e.g. oil mill, plantation infrastructure, and land lease contracts) and resurrect the project under the name of Acazis AG with a new agro-industrial business strategy (Solomon Bekele, 2011). Initially, this was to produce castor and groundnuts on plantations and process a variety of edible and non-edible oils, but when this turned out to be an unprofitable

[15] Interview with official at East Hararghe Social Affairs Administration Office, Harar, June 2014. [16] Focus group discussion with Contract Farmers, Fadis, July 2014; Focus Group Discussion with Plantation Workers, Midega Tola, July 2014.

enterprise too, and a final failure became imminent by 2014/2015, the investors turned to speculation and the sell-off of assets[17].

As one of the first biofuel investors to sign a deal with the Oromia Regional State in 2006, FEP stood and fell as a premature pioneer in frontier castor production in Ethiopia. However, FEP's early defects should have been a warning-sign to investors that subsequently set up near identical, if not clone projects to produce castor on plantations and/or with outgrowers in other parts of Ethiopia. This includes GEE, which commenced operations in Wolaita roughly a year after FEP. However, before we continue with the second case of GEE, it should be mentioned at this point that there were both (opaque) financial links and (overt) management interactions between the two investment projects.

The latter consisted of the fact that the project managers of FEP and GEE, although not affiliated formally, cooperated informally at various stages of their operations and exchanged market information. Most notably, they shared a blueprint of the outgrower "collaboration agreement" in their respective start-up phase, which explains the similar property and production arrangements in their very different investment destinations. Moreover, after FEP's failure, GEE's project manager sought to acquire left-over agricultural machinery and inputs and to employ former FEP agronomists[18].

The former, i.e. financial links between both companies, were maintained in a petty manner by an individual who held minority shares in FEP and GEE. Acting as fixer in the early phases of each project, he would then move on to found a number of what can be called castor clone companies in other parts of Ethiopia. In turn, he sought to spin these off to incoming investors, including: The Giving Tree Nursery Plc (ca. 2009 in Arsi zone, Oromia Region), BC Agrotech Plc (ca. 2010, never operational), and Agropeace Plc (ca. 2011, in Shinile zone, Somali Region). While all of these *ad hoc* companies eventually failed, castor arguably emerged temporarily as an investment boom crop in Ethiopia. Largely intransparent, and beyond the scope of this article, were the transnational financial links between the strategic shareholders and parent firm structures behind FEP (e.g. Global Natural Resources Holding, reg. Zurich) and GEE (e.g. Global Energy Inc., reg. Nevada) and affiliated offshore firms, registered in Cyprus (see Wedekind, forthcoming).

7. Global Energy Ethiopia in Wolaita

At the beginning of the 2000s, Wolaita was one of the most populated rural areas of Ethiopia with an average population density of 600 persons/km^2

[17] See Wedekind (2021) for an account of FEP's after-life as Acazis AG in Hararghe. [18] Interview with Former GEE Owner and Project Manager, Addis Ababa, September 2014.

(Abbink, 2011: 87). Under the combined effect of rapid population growth, limited opportunities for out-migration, and an economy overwhelmingly based on agriculture, Wolaita farmers cultivated any piece of land available including the steep hillsides of Mount Damot (Planel, 2007). Despite these efforts, Wolaita was characterised by recurrent food crisis and an agrarian paradox shared with other agricultural areas in Ethiopia, as the above case of Hararghe also indicates. With average farm sizes constantly decreasing to accommodate growing numbers of young claimants, over the course of the 2000s local safety net structures, including the production of *enset*, were so overtaxed they were often unable to absorb the shocks generated by recurrent production failures.

Against this bleak background in 2007, news of two foreign investors signing deals with the Federal government to produce and process biodiesel in the zone, made headlines (Tsegaye Tadesse, 2008). Under the first, 3000 ha of state land in Offa *woreda* were allocated to the British Sun-Biofuels Plc for the production of jatropha on plantations. An experimental plot of 150 ha was put under cultivation in 2008 but never scaled-up. The second deal struck by government was with the Israeli operated company Global Energy Ethiopia[19] to produce castor. GEE was operational between 2007 and 2012 in three *woreda* in Wolaita (Offa, Kindo Koisha, and Damot Woyde), as well as in parts of the neighbouring Gamo Goffa zone. The arrival of these investments generated mixed reactions among farmers in Wolaita. Many regarded them as an opportunity to rejuvenate the local economy that would create new job opportunities in agriculture and within the biofuel value chain. The news also raised concerns about the impact on the local economy of diverting a significant amount of land from food production for local consumption to biodiesel (Maasho, 2009).

This was not the first time that state-led initiatives around land and agriculture were attempted in the recent history of Wolaita. At least since Wolaita's incorporation into the Ethiopian Empire by the forces of Menelik II in 1894, land control underlined broader patterns of authority, power, and identity formation. Imperial state authority in Wolaita was enforced through a mixed system of co-optation of local elites (*balabbat*), the deployment of Abyssinian administrators (*melkegna*), and soldiers (*neftegna*), all of whom were given land in exchange for the services rendered to the crown. Under this system of landlordism, Wolaita farmers became "tenants on their own land" and were required to pay tribute by giving up part of their agricultural production to landlords. This exploitative system shaped the relationship between land and

[19] The company was funded by the US (Nevada) based majority shareholder Global Energy Inc.

political authority, and elements of this affect commercialisation attempts to this day (Dessalegn Rahmato, 2007).

Since the late Imperial period, agriculture commercialisation was regarded as an important pathway to rural modernisation. In 1971 the province was chosen to host the Wolaita Agricultural Development Unit (WADU), a World Bank sponsored integrated development project aimed at sustaining agriculture through the provision of modern seeds and fertilisers, credit and other extension services to farmers (Dessalegn Rahmato, 2007). Although the programme continued under the Derg, it was progressively dismantled due to the lack of resources and finally closed in 1984. The socialist regime also marked the decline of commercial agriculture more broadly. The radical 1975 land reform dismantled the system of landlordism established after 1894, including a minority of successful large-scale commercial farmers. Land redistribution restructured social and political relations and had a radical equalising effect on the pattern of landholdings. While commercial estates in Wolaita were turned into state farms the socialisation policies of the Derg, including forced collectivisation and villagisation, never translated into a successful model of rural development (see Aalen, 2011). Under EPRDF, Wolaita's agricultural stagnation, in which self-reinforcing dynamics of population growth, land shortage, and progressive soil degradation were at play, became acute (Abbink, 2011: 90).

When GEE started operating in Wolaita in 2008, this was the first significant attempt to promote agricultural commercialisation since the mid-1980s. The company undertook individual CF arrangements with over 10,000 smallholder farmers, covering approximately 7,000 ha of land, to buy castor beans at a fixed price. Initially GEE also stipulated a deal to farm 2,925 ha of state land on a plantation base at a rent of 47 ETB/ha/year, but never followed up on this. In 2009, the Wolaita zone granted some extra land to GEE in Sodo town to build a processing plant for castor oil which was however never developed[20]. Having discussed the development impact of GEE elsewhere (see Chinigò, 2015a), we focus here specifically on the local interface within which the AQ of labour outlined above unfolded.

An important dimension of commercialisation through CF in Wolaita is that GEE's initiative was designed and engineered from above. This represents an element of continuity with the history of exploitative land relations discussed above. The project was advanced with the EPRDF's ideological concern of achieving rapid rural modernisation through CF—an objective that intersected with the interests of corporate capital to seek quick

[20] "Ethiopia bio-energy company unable to assemble its processing plant", 2009, October 13, Addis Fortune [URL: https://landmatrix.org/media/uploads/ethiopianreviewcomarticles31008.pdf].

returns from land investments. The investment agreement and land deal were initially signed between the project manager of GEE Plc. and the Ethiopian Investment Commission. This suggests that limited or no consultation at all took place with local administrative offices over modalities, arrangements, and potential challenges. In contrast to FEP, regional and zone administrations were involved at a later stage and only when it became necessary to allocate land and select potential farmers. GEE hired 300 employees for administrative duties to interface with local government and to work as EWs (extension workers).

Similarly, for the mobilisation of outgrowers no consultation took place with farmers. Like for other state-led development initiatives, farmers were targeted through lists that were created by local officials of the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO) at *kebele* level, and then sent to the upper *woreda* and zone levels. GEE's EWs relied on so-called model farmers (MFs)—"leaders" that government entrusted to work as intermediaries to fast track local development initiatives—for seeds and fertiliser distribution. The only exception was distribution of pesticides, which were administered by an agricultural officer and the company EWs at *kebele* level. Contracted farmers were first exposed to the project through dissemination initiatives organised by EWs and local officials. In theory, they were free to decide whether to join the project or not, as well as how much land they would commit to the production of castor. However, at the local level, the difference between business activity and political project was blurred. Many farmers felt compelled to join GEE's project as just another one of EPRDF's political mobilisation programmes. As one EW explained, in a context of profound uncertainty and lack of opportunities, very few farmers could afford to not enrol in a programme when the government directly facilitated this[21].

Comparably to the case of FEP in Hararghe, Wolaita farmers were not consulted about agronomic techniques, potential risks, and in general sharing their indigenous knowledge and experience. This was a striking omission, considering that castor is an indigenous crop in Wolaita and traditionally used for multiple purposes by households. Rather, trainings conducted by EWs followed a top-down approach and were meant to "instruct people about modern agriculture[22]." All these factors contributed to the perception of the project as just another development initiative imposed from above, which farmers had to navigate in order to make the most of potential opportunities and minimise costs (see Planel, 2014). Nonetheless, many farmers joined the project enthusiastically and truly believed it could be transformative for their livelihoods.

[21] Interview with a former GEE extension worker, Wolaita, 10 April 2012.
[22] Interview with a former GEE extension worker, Wolaita, 12 April 2012.

The stipulations of GEE's contracts highlight the labour-exploitative nature of outgrower schemes. Farmers were forced to commit at least half of their land to castor production and were bound to sell the entire produce to GEE for the initial six years. Where land was the only source of income, this meant that households became dependent on the fate of the project for their daily survival and future success. However, the investor was not required to provide the same level of commitment. Contracts did not bind GEE to a specific production time frame and could be terminated at any time. No stipulation to compensation was made in case of harvest loss, a burden that was left entirely on farmers. GEE externalised risks of economic failure to farmers (including ecological causes such as land degradation, droughts) and shifted any social responsibilities (e.g. securities, salaries) towards labour. From its side, GEE committed only to providing seeds and fertilisers and deducting their costs from payment to farmers after harvest. Thus, the company effectively committed to buy the entire yield at a fixed price.

Formalised contracts limited farmers' flexible mode of production, based on constant adjustments to recurrent shocks and changing crops and inputs prices. Staple crops like sorghum and root crops traditionally farmed in Wolaita, while on average less remunerative, represented the safest investment because of their relative stability in the face of changing circumstances, including their use for direct consumption. Conversely, castor production was by definition a high-risk investment. It bound farmers to produce to one buyer only, leaving farmers without real alternatives in spite of market conditions that were continuously changing. Therefore, contracts represented a significant source of tension between farmers, the company, and local government.

Many farmers were initially excited about the project because they found it remarkable that a company was going to pay cash for a crop they regarded as marginal. GEE agronomists, who were presented by EWs as "scientists," suggested that castor had the potential to yield 70-120 q/ha, depending on specific conditions. These estimations turned out to be largely speculative, with one EW noting that the company decided to start an experimental plot only after contracts had been signed with farmers. The experimental plot later showed that the productivity of castor was 7-10 times lower than predicted. This was in line with what farmers managed to harvest in the first year, on average 8-10 q/ha. The mismatch between projection and actual production angered many farmers, generating significant mistrust in EWs. Some decided to quit, while others decided to continue hoping for a better harvest the year after.

Like in the case of Hararghe, the changing price structure for agricultural crops between 2007 and 2008 contributed significantly to the failure of the project. Initially, GEE set a price of 1 ETB/kg of castor which farmers considered acceptable considering the high projected yields. However, rising international and national food prices in 2007-2008 made traditional crops such as sorghum much more remunerative for farmers. At the local level, the fact that a significant number of farmers had shifted production away from food generated an even greater upward pressure on prices of staple crops. Castor turned out to be less productive than expected while its market price was significantly less than that paid for food crops. Partly acknowledging these issues, in the second year GEE raised the price of castor beans to 1.8 ETB/kg. Input distribution presented similar challenges. While GEE committed to distribute seeds and fertilisers, many farmers complained that inputs were distributed late. Thus, the cost of fertilisers rose three times in the course of the three years that GEE operated in Wolaita. GEE attempted to introduce techniques that would boost productivity, such as crop rotation and intercropping, but farmers obtained modest improvements only. Ultimately, poor rains and more or less overt acts of resistance (discussed below) contributed to yields lower than those of the previous year.

All these issues forced GEE to suspend operations by 2011 and soon thereafter to leave Wolaita. GEE discontinued contracts of EWs at short notice, but many of them had already left the project prematurely, which only accelerated its demise. By the end of GEE's operations, only a few farmers were still willing to continue producing castor beans. The project failure generated significant losses for the farmers involved. While GEE's authoritarian model of implementation laid bare inadequate project management and poor decision-making that disregarded local knowledge and local socio-economic and ecological conditions, contracted farmers were not merely subservient to land and labour control and commands from above. While it is important not to overestimate the significance of resistance, daily practices of more or less overt subversion played a significant role in determining a premature end of the project. The unfolding of resistance can be illustrated through the following example about the distribution of fertilisers.

As soon as it became clear that the first harvest generated yields considerably smaller than predicted by the company, the question about who had to provide for the cost of inputs became extremely sensitive. Farmers protested heavily and contended that they should not be charged for the cost of inputs because the company "was grossly overestimating the potential harvest[23]." GEE's perspective was very different: EWs claimed that low yields were rather due to farmers not following the company's instructions.

While both versions of the story hold a grain of truth, struggles over fertiliser distribution became an important tactic, more or less overt and intentional,

[23] Interview with a farmer in Wolaita, 13 April 2012.

that farmers used to turn a dysfunctional project into an advantageous one. After a disappointing first harvest, many farmers used the fertilisers they received from GEE to farm other crops such as maize and sorghum. Farmers who were interviewed considered this practice as a legitimate compensation for their losses. Others managed to obtain some gains by reselling fertilisers on the local market. Many local officials and some EWs, although not overtly, sympathised with this view. Farmers expressed their frustration as follows:

> How can they charge us for fertilisers and seeds when production was so poor? [...] The company is responsible for that, not farmers [...]. If they don't give us compensation, we'll not pay fertilisers back[24].

This also explains why, despite failed harvests in the first year, many farmers decided to nevertheless enrol the following year. While they had little trust in the improvement of castor production, they sought to benefit from the distribution of fertilisers, whose cost in the local market was constantly growing. Many knew that it would be very difficult for GEE to claim back the cost of inputs after a—likely—failed harvest the following year. At the same time, remaining formally enroled in the project signaled compliance with government demands for "participation in development"—a demand that was otherwise difficult to escape. Consequently, in the second year farmers were not motivated to generate successful castor yields, but participated just to make the most of the (limited) opportunities GEE provided. Forms of resistance included re-selling fertilisers informally, using them to boost the productivity of traditional crops, and to enter customary sharecropping arrangements. As analysed elsewhere, the power of intermediation afforded to MFs by the state often resulted in significant gains on their behalf (Chinigò, 2015b). Thus, MFs managed to navigate the project's challenges better and potentially even accumulate capital (e.g. through fertiliser sales) in comparison to poorer farmers who were hard-hit by failed castor harvests. This points to the diversified impact of failed commercialisation schemes, including inherent dynamics of social differentiation and potential class formation.

Farmers tried to make the most of available opportunities to ensure their subsistence in the face of low yields and, when it became apparent that the project was failing to improve their livelihoods, tried to cope with the costs of a failing project—which they perceived as an imposition from above—on their households. Resistance and subversion to the project were key coping strategies. Practices of resistance contributed not only to the economic failure of the project, but rather added a further layer of tension around the agrarian question of labour.

[24] Interview with a farmer in Wolaita, 25 April 2012.

Incidents over input distribution exacerbated an already deteriorating relationship between the company and its EWs, as well as with farmers. Some EWs noted that after mounting tensions, comparable to the case of FEP in Hararghe, they were often unable to reach the field because they felt threatened by the farmers. Initially, GEE attempted to rectify the situation by transferring the responsibility for fertiliser distribution from the MFs to *kebele* managers, but by mid-2010 working relations with farmers were already compromised.

Furthermore, the transfer of a communal plot of land for the production of biofuels on plantations to GEE and the British Sun Biofuels only contributed to mounting tensions. Protests in Offa *woreda* protracted for several months between late-2009 and mid-2010 and forced the local government to distance itself from facilitating the biofuels production of the two companies. All these factors, including pressures from local government institutions, induced GEE to leave Wolaita in 2011. Contracts of EWs were discontinued at short notice, and farmers were left with the burden to abandon castor production and return to traditional crops.

While GEE eventually lost its investment, the local communities and farmers were left with the burden and long-term costs the project would have in Wolaita. As GEE looked destined to fail in Wolaita, the investor moved to limit financial losses by preparing to transfer company ownership to Cyprus-based offshore investment fund Presaco Investments Ltd. to service and salvage any remaining assets of GEE[25].

8. Conclusion

The failure of biofuel initiatives in both Hararghe and Wolaita show the salience of the AQ of labour and the inability of commercialisation initiatives to provide for a smooth, de-politicised departure from the predominant smallholder socio-economic structure.

Combined, the two case studies reveal firstly that top-down planning and implementation of CF, and the processes of subversion and resistance this engendered, played a crucial role in the ultimate failure of the investment projects. It shows that agricultural commercialisation, based on the state's coercive contractual incorporation of smallholders into large-scale land deals, can lead to a backlash that undermines the state's development(al) strategies. Secondly, the legacy that the failure of the projects left behind added fuel to an already politicised fire surrounding the question of labour, i.e. the extent to which the attempted agricultural transformation to commercialised agro-industrial production can sufficiently diversify incomes and offer employment

[25] See "Purchase Agreement", 2009, March 10, available online [URL: https://www.lawinsider.com/contracts/10ciolUgdzC4FN43do5QmR/global-energy-inc/0/2009-03-10].

opportunities to offset social ills and political grievances. Thirdly, the two combined cases of CF reveal the same land and labour exploitative logic behind investments that prioritise quick returns over long-term planning and thereby disregard the local socio-economic and ecological conditions in which they intervene.

Despite their specificities, the two cases cast a shadow on the ostensive capacity of the Ethiopian state to mitigate the adversities and contradictions of investment-based, state-mediated agrarian commercialisation through CF. Beside the economic significance of failed agricultural investment projects, (overt) protests and conflicts that followed (silent) subversions in Wolaita (mentioned above, between 2009 and 2010) and Hararghe (since ca. 2014) marked an additional point of rupture in the relationship between government and farmers, prior to reforms and a change in EPRDF leadership in early 2018. This is particularly significant, given that since the EPRDF came to power in the 1990s, the leadership always counted on smallholder support as a central social constituency.

One can only speculate about the role of failed investment projects in contributing to the 2016-2018 country-wide political protests (Dessalegn Rahmato, 2014), many of which also took place in rural towns of Hararghe and even led to the destruction of FEP's deserted, government-confiscated oil mill in Fadis (see Africa Intelligence, 2017). Land conflict in Oromia lay at the heart of protests that led to two state of emergencies (Awol Allo, 2017) and a shift within the EPRDF's balance of power that gave the rise to the appointment of current PM Abiy Ahmed, who identifies as Oromo. In Wolaita, tensions have unfolded even further and are currently articulated along a politically charged debate about statehood recognition, formulated along demands to establish a separate administrative entity elevating its zone status to regional state—a claim to self-determination that runs parallel to that initiated (and achieved) by neighbouring Sidama (Ermias Tasfaye, 2019).

Far from proceeding towards the political leadership's own understanding of political and economic modernity, the selective liberalisation model embarked on by the Ethiopian state since the mid-2000s widened the gap between a handful of flagship mega-development projects, and state facilitated FDI projects with variegated and controversial impacts that often fall under the radar of analysis but have contributed mounting land and labour questions and social unrest. Whether the historical changes that took place in Ethiopia in April 2018 are able to reverse these contradictions, with emphasis on a combination of political and economic liberalisation, now requires scholarly attention. The recent drafting of a proclamation by the Ministry of Agriculture to up-scale CF based smallholder integration into market arrangements[26] and the Agricultural Transformation Agency's rapid expansion of Agricultural Commercialization Clusters that combine smallholder parcels into large wheat producing clusters (Louhichi *et al.*, 2019), also suggest a persistence with attempts to commercialise smallholder agriculture. Their relationship with large-scale land deals with foreign investors, many of which have been subject to review by the government, remains to be studied. What is certain, however, is that the relationship between land investments and questions of labour is deeply imbricated within the country's history of state formation and today remains politically charged. Indeed, while state formation and power in Ethiopia was historically vested in land and socially based on smallholders, this now increasingly hinges on managing diversifying and stratifying rural and urban labour relations.

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[26] See "Ministry to Introduce Contract Farming", 2020, March 1, *Addis Fortune* [URL: https://addisfortune.news/ministry-to-introduce-contract-farming/].

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