

Politics of development in Africa
The Addis Ababa Master Plan (2014)

“Developing an internationally competitive urban region through an efficient and sustainable spatial organization that enhances and takes advantage of complementarities is the major theme for the preparation of the new plan”. These were the words of the General Manager at the Addis Ababa City Planning Project Office from 2012–2016, Mathewos Asfaw Bekele, quoted in a June 2014 article published by the Addis Standard¹ concerning the controversial Addis Ababa 2014 Master Plan. Through the vocabulary used (“developing”, “competitive”, “efficient”), one can clearly see that this ambitious urban planning project finds its roots in contemporary developmentalist paradigms, highly influenced by neoliberalism and the ideas that applying the law of free market in every socio-economic sector will eventually lead to growth and prosperity. To put it in a nutshell, the Addis Ababa 2014 Master Plan, short for the “Addis Ababa and Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfinne Integrated Development Plan”, is an aborted development project that aimed to integrate various areas surrounding the capital city to its administration, in order to expand housing and economic activity (by constructing new residential and commercial facilities). This integration started in 2008 with the creation of the “Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfinne”, in charge of bettering cooperation and development within the area while controlling urban growth, and was pursued by a joint Project Office on issues of urban development established by the officials of Addis Ababa and the Oromia special zone in 2011. In 2013, the TPLF-led government (Tigray People's Liberation Front) officially supported the project and aimed to start its implementation the following year. In respect to Mathewos Asfaw Bekele's quote, the 2014 Addis Ababa Master Plan was thus described as beneficial for every actor and group implied, both for Addis Ababa and the Oromos. However, before it could even be implemented, the Plan was met with huge protests up until 2016, marked by deadly repression, which ended in the government actually renouncing this development project.

This case sheds light on various issues surrounding development projects; notably the transparency and accountability of the governors (largely challenged by the protests), the role of so-called “civil societies” and foreign actors, but also the influence of historical legacies, as Addis Ababa is characterized by a tradition of urban planning mirroring the successive political regimes – evoking what one could call a form of path dependency. Therefore, this essay will try to contextualize and analyze the 2014 Addis Ababa Master Plan, through its main actors, the discourses defending or opposing it, and its possible link to previous urban development projects, in order to understand its failure (considering that a “failed” development project informs us just as much as a “successful” one, as James Ferguson showed²).

I. The 2014 Master Plan : goals, actors, language and numbers

As previously mentioned, the Addis Ababa Master Plan (AAMP) was an urban development project aiming to expand the capital city into the surrounding Oromia Special Zone. The plan sought to coordinate land use, infrastructures, and economic development across urban and rural boundaries. The origins of the AAMP can be traced to the creation of the Oromia Special Zone Surrounding Finfinne (OSZ) in 2008, which was established to

¹ “A new master plan : complicated-turned-deadly”, Kalkidan Yibeltal in *Addis Standard*, June 24 2014

² Ferguson, James. *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

administratively manage the towns surrounding Addis Ababa. In fact, the Master Plan finds its roots in a joint initiative to address shared urban development challenges, launched in 2011 between the Addis Ababa Master Plan Project Office and OSZ officials. The plan aimed at three principal objectives, deeply entrenched into the international competition in today's globalizing economy. First, it has to accelerate the country's urbanization. Second, the plan aimed to make Ethiopia's tourism, business and service delivery competitive at the international level. Finally, it should boost Ethiopia's position in the economic cooperation across Africa by making Addis Ababa a hub.

The formulation and promotion of the AAMP were driven by a coalition of actors, including the federal government, the Addis Ababa City Administration, and urban planning technocrats. The project was spearheaded by Kuma Demeksa, a prominent Oromo politician and the mayor of Addis Ababa between 2008 and 2013. He is indeed a founding member of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), one of the key parties within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) at the head of the State in 2013. Demeksa's involvement reflects how the project was embedded within party-state structures because his position enabled the plan to move from a technical proposal to a political priority. The project's insertion into the national agenda was furthermore facilitated by the centralized power of the EPRDF, which often used development planning as a tool to consolidate control. The adoption of this Master plan also illustrates the strategy of the EPRDF to use land as an instrument for garnering political support and accumulating wealth through legal and illegal practices of land appropriation³). In fact, the choice of EPRDF politicians to embark on massive projects framed as « development » is deeply entrenched with the diminishing support from urban elites demonstrated in former elections.

One of the most striking aspects of the AAMP was how it was framed in the official discourses. This plan, which actually – one can argue – consisted in a land grabbing and a land expropriation project, was consistently presented as a development project, which in itself operates as a discursive shield that renders opposition politically risky. As Gilbert Rist argues, “development” functions as a modern fetish, a powerful narrative that legitimizes interventions, regardless of their social consequences⁴. The language used in official documents and speeches (such as the document of the World Bank Group⁵) was filled with “dev-speak”, a term coined by James Ferguson to describe the depoliticized and technocratic vocabulary used to justify state and donor interventions⁶. The use of “buzzwords” like “sustainable”, “inclusive”, and “modernization” (as theorized by Andrea Cornwall⁷) helped to produce a consensus-building illusion, while obscuring the conflicts and displacements the project would provoke. It attenuates the capitalist tenets of the plan, by focusing on development and not on the economic imperatives of the plan (the integration of the OSZ to provide services within the framework of international standards). This particular framing process became obvious in the State promotion campaign of the project, organized through a series of discussions in the mainstream media affiliated with the federal government (such as ETV and the Ethiopian Radio). This vocabulary also relied on emic terms drawn from the dominant urban planning and state-building ideology, often disconnecting from the lived experiences and vernacular knowledge of the Oromo communities affected.

³ Regassa, Asebe; Soboka, Teshome Emana. Urban development and the making of frontiers in/from Addis Ababa/Finfinne, Ethiopia. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 2023

⁴ Rist, Gilbert. *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*. London: Zed Books, 2008.

⁵ “Addis Ababa, Ethiopia Enhancing Urban Resilience”, the World Bank Group, GFDRR, 2015

⁶ Ferguson, James. *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

⁷ Cornwall, Andrea, and Karen Brock. *What Do Buzzwords Do for Development Policy? A Critical Look at ‘Participation’, ‘Empowerment’ and ‘Poverty Reduction’*. Third World Quarterly, 2005

The legitimacy of the AAMP was further reinforced through the strategic use of data, statistics, and spatial analysis. Numbers are at the core of the definition of Plan's objectives : "to accelerate the country's urbanization from the current 17% to 30% within the following 10 years, and to 50% within a period of 25 years"⁸. Population growth figures, housing deficits, and economic forecasts were mobilized to demonstrate the "rational necessity" of integrating the capital with its surrounding areas. Here, the work of Joel Glassman and Morten Jerven is particularly relevant, both scholars warn against the political and technical limitations of quantification in development planning. As Jerven argues in *Poor Numbers*, statistical data in many African contexts are often outdated, imprecise, or manipulated, yet they are treated as neutral, objective inputs into policymaking⁹. In the case of the AAMP, figures about land availability, demographic pressure, and projected economic growth were used to present the expansion as inevitable and scientific, rather than contestable and political.

II. A controversial development project enshrined in a legacy of coercive urban planning in Ethiopia

Dwelling on the history of urban planning in Addis Abeba can help us better understand the strength of certain social dynamics, notably the relation between the State and the rural population (mainly the Oromos). The case of the 2014 Master Plan in fact shares striking similarities with previous urban projects (even if they were not labelled as "development" projects) up until the 19th century. According to Dandena Tufa in a paper offering an historical overview of urban planning in Addis Ababa¹⁰, the origins of the capital city draw on coercion and dispossession of rural populations, with confiscation of pasture land and Oromo revolts already in the 1860s. More broadly, the idea of a "master plan" in Addis Ababa carries many heritages and representations, shaped by the successive political regimes. The Italian colonization for instance was short (1936-1941) but significant in terms of urban planning. Addis Ababa indeed became by order of Mussolini the capital of *Africa Orientale Italiana* (the Italian colonies, which included Somalia, Eritrea & Ethiopia). Wanting to showcase their control over these territories, the occupying power aimed to re-shape the city of Addis Ababa as a way to establish their power and create a "beautiful city"¹¹, a window for the Italian colonies. This led to a series of urban plans proposed by Le Corbusier, Guidi & C. Valle (two Italian architects), which, even if they weren't actually implemented, show that the tradition of urban planning is highly marked by the intervention of foreign actors.

On the other hand, the communist rule starting from 1974 displayed another approach to urban planning, as "Urban Development and Housing" were considered as pressing issues (regarding the ideological framework), as a Minister was dedicated to this matter. But even in this context, foreign actors come into play: K. Polonyi, a Hungarian architect, worked alongside the Ministry, and in 1986, the new Master Plan implemented was conceived in cooperation between the Ethiopian and Italian governments. In the latter, the main ideas were to create "balanced urban system" and to allow the "integration" of various urban levels, mainly the rural areas surrounding the city¹². The ambiguity of the vocabulary used, of these

⁸ Regassa, Asebe; Soboka, Teshome Emana. "Urban development and the making of frontiers in/from Addis Ababa/Finfinne", Ethiopia. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 2023

⁹ Jerven M, *Poor Numbers. How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It ?* Cornell University Press. 2013

¹⁰ Tufa, Dandena. Historical development of Addis Ababa : plans and realities. *Journal of Ethiopian studies*. 41. 2008. p. 27-60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

“buzzwords”¹³ of urban development, is here obvious: how does one define the “balance”? It is hard to be against “balance” and oppose projects claiming this ideal, even though what appears “balanced” can change according to one’s reference. Eventually, after the collapse of the communist regime in 1991, the governors pursued this tradition of urban planning in the capital city, notably with the 2003 revised Addis Ababa Master Plan, this time in the framework of the “market-economy”, with the idea of planning “the available urban space in more efficient manner” (“efficient” being the new buzzword), reminiscent of the concerns of the 2014 Plan¹⁴.

Some authors tried to propose a Marxist reading of this history, such as Asebe Regassa and Teshome Emanu Soboka in a paper published in the *Journal of Asian and African Studies*¹⁵. They argue that the Oromo resistance to these projects since the 19th century is a fundamental part in shaping the city, and mainly what they call its “frontiers” (peripheral rural areas, mainly considered by the elites in power as a “resource extraction point”). Dwelling on the dynamics of property accumulation by feudal lords, then the Italians, then the State, they show a constant movement of “legitimized expropriation of peri-urban land and its incorporation into urban land administration”, without real compensation to the rural workers. In that respect, the “developmental state political economy” in which the government engaged in 2005 would be no more than a new embodiment of this movement. Even though we cannot reduce every “development” urban project in Ethiopia as a façade, considering that the country has to address pressing issue (it was notably ranked second poorest country in the world by the Oxford poverty and human development initiative – a figure showing besides the place of international organization nowadays in the framing of projects¹⁶), it appears clearly that what is at stake here is a two-century-long story of exclusion, dispossession and confrontation between the State and the Oromo.

In that respect, our analysis of the AAAMP is enshrined in broader debates and divergent readings of development projects: these plans shouldn’t be reduced to relations of power and domination between the North and the global South, foreign actors and so-called locals; they often reflect various forms of internal antagonisms, often implying what Issa Shivji calls a “bureaucratic bourgeoisie”¹⁷.

III. Opposing the AAAMP : shifting from a criticism of the project to a political discourse on the State

The Addis Ababa Master Plan, more than a contested urban planning project, became a major subject of political resistance, especially among the Oromo population, (Ethiopia's largest ethnic group). While framed by the state as a technical and developmental necessity, many Oromo communities interpreted the plan as a direct threat to their land, identity, and political autonomy. This opposition was rooted in long-standing grievances about land dispossession, cultural marginalization, and the centralization of state power in this federal State.

The roots of the contestation can be seen since the beginning of the project in the lack of public consultation. In fact, despite the plan's supposed aim to promote integration, there was minimal consultation with Oromo communities and local governance structures during the build of the proposal. Also the involvement of OPDO officials did not help provide the plan the legitimacy of ethnic representation. Many Oromo critics saw this as a case of elite co-optation rather than genuine participatory governance. Beginning in 2014, protests against

¹³ Cornwall, Andrea. *Op. cit.*

¹⁴ Tufa, Dandena. *Op. cit.*

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*

¹⁶ *Global MPI 2014* | OPHI. En ligne : <https://ophi.org.uk/global-mpi/2014>

¹⁷ Shivji, Issa G., *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (London: Heinemann, 1976)

the AAMP spread rapidly across towns in the Oromia Region. Demonstrators (many of them university students, teachers, and youth activists) voiced concern that the plan would lead to forced evictions, displacement of farmers, and the erosion of Oromo administrative control over areas surrounding Addis Ababa. By late 2015 and early 2016, these protests had escalated into mass mobilizations. According to human rights organizations, over 800 protesters were killed by security forces during this period. The government's heavy-handed repression amplified the unrest (mass arrests, internet shutdown, land confiscation, expulsions of students...). What began as a critique of a specific urban development project evolved into a broader movement questioning state legitimacy and the nature of developmental authoritarianism in Ethiopia. International actors (Human Rights Watch, the UN, Western governments) criticized the Ethiopian government's handling of the crisis, putting additional pressure on authorities. These external and internal oppositions eventually forced the government to formally cancel the AAMP in January 2016. It explains how the authoritarian EPRDF regime failed to implement the plan.

As the protests and the repression progressed, the discourse shifted. Initial demands for the revision or cancellation of the Master Plan gave way to a broader critique of governance, ethnic federalism, and the lack of democratic participation. Activists, mainly through social media and independent journals such as the *Addis Standard*, began to denounce not only the AAMP but also the deep-rooted centralization of power, the opacity of bureaucratic processes, and the State's instrumental use of "development" to control peripheral regions. This evolution echoes the insights of Mehdi Labzaé, who emphasizes the structural centrality of land in Ethiopian politics¹⁸. In a context where land remains state-owned and bureaucratically allocated, disputes over land become proxies for larger battles over political inclusion, recognition, and sovereignty.

The project finally raised a lot of debates in Ethiopian society that can be analysed by a sociology of the opposing voices. The anti-AAMP movement brought together a diverse coalition of actors such as student networks (central role in organizing protests and circulating information on social media), and farmers, religious leaders and elders at the grassroots level (providing moral and cultural legitimacy to the movement). Protests illustrate the different readings of the AAMP according to actors' position within the field. State planners and technocrats adopted a developmentalist reading, emphasizing growth, infrastructure, and modernization while Oromo activists saw the plan as a form of state violence, in a Marxist postcolonial critique that linked development to accumulation by dispossession (it was framed as "a plan to expand the capital, Addis Ababa, by approximately 1.1 million hectares into Oromia" (Pinaud and Raleigh, 2017)). Some EPRDF elites also interpreted the opposition as a threat to national unity, framing the protests as manipulated by "anti-peace forces" or "ethno-nationalists". This diversity of interpretations reflects Ferguson's concept of "anti-politics": the idea that development projects are often depoliticized by technocratic language, while in practice they are deeply political. The anti-AAMP protest finally contributed to a national political crisis in Ethiopia, which eventually led to the resignation of the Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and the rise of Abiy Ahmed in 2018 who won the election partly on a promise to address Oromo grievances and initiate political reform.

The trajectory of the 2014 Addis Ababa Master Plan highlights how development is far from being a consensual or apolitical goal. It often crystallizes deep structural tensions

¹⁸ Labzaé, M. "Une politique 'pré-conflit'? Violences et politiques foncières dans les basses terres éthiopiennes." *Revue internationale des études du développement*, 2020

between state and society, central power and peripheral identities, technocratic discourse and lived realities. While officially presented as a win-win strategy for growth and integration, the Master Plan revealed the limits of top-down planning in a context where land, governance, and identity are profoundly interlinked.

Yet, the fall of the Master Plan did not mark the end of ambitious urban transformations in Ethiopia. Since coming to power in 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, himself a political product of the post-AAMP crisis, has promoted a new vision for Addis Ababa as a global, modern capital. Recent projects, such as the redevelopment of historical neighborhoods like Piazza, continue to reshape the city within the capital's boundaries. However, these transformations raise new concerns about the cultural memory and urban identity of the city and new issues with the destruction of architectural heritage linked with the Italian colonial landmarks in Addis Ababa.