

# **The role of the state in contemporary processes of late-late development A diagnosis of the Ethiopian experience to illustrate a renewed debate**

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## **El papel del Estado en los procesos contemporáneos de desarrollo tardío Diagnóstico de la experiencia etíope para ilustrar un debate renovado**

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## A diagnosis of the Ethiopian experience to illustrate a renewed debate

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### Citar como/cite as:

Pérez-Lagüela E (2025). The role of the state in contemporary processes of late-late development. A diagnosis of the Ethiopian experience to illustrate a renewed debate. *Iberoamerican Journal of Development Studies* 14(2):62-85.  
DOI: 10.26754/ojs\_ried/ijds.9990

### Abstract

Recent economic performance in Ethiopia has revived research on the role of the state in development processes. Assessing the relevance of the Ethiopian experience provides valuable insights to the discussion on the scope and limits of state action in other contemporary development experiences. This paper presents a case study based on elite interviews conducted during fieldwork in Ethiopia. The results of our research suggest that, while it is possible to argue that the Ethiopian state acquired developmentalist traits during the period 1994-2015, the characterisation of the state as «developmentalist» was used to sustain Meles Zenawi's personalist political project. In Ethiopia, state-led development was not just an economic strategy aimed at structural transformation, but rather a means to maintain power.

**Keywords:** developmental state, late-late development, Ethiopia.

### Resumen

Los recientes resultados económicos en Etiopía han reavivado la investigación sobre el papel del Estado en los procesos de desarrollo. Evaluar la importancia de la experiencia etíope aporta información valiosa a la discusión sobre el alcance y los límites de la acción estatal en otras experiencias contemporáneas de desarrollo. En este artículo, se presenta un estudio de caso apoyado en entrevistas a élites realizadas durante trabajo de campo en Etiopía. Los resultados de nuestra investigación sugieren que, aunque es posible afirmar que el Estado etíope adquirió rasgos desarrollistas durante el período 1994-2015, la caracterización del Estado como «desarrollista» se utilizó para sostener el proyecto político personalista de Meles Zenawi. En Etiopía, el desarrollo dirigido por el Estado no fue solo una estrategia económica encaminada a la transformación estructural, sino más bien un medio para mantener el poder.

**Palabras clave:** Estado desarrollista, desarrollo tardío, Etiopía.

# 1 Introduction

Ethiopia, having long been identified with famine, hunger, humanitarian catastrophes, and civil strife, has officially joined the group of Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC) countries in January 2024. How Ethiopia has managed to strengthen its position as one of the so-called «emerging powers» in the sub-Saharan African region, and how the Ethiopian government has managed the challenges of structural transformation, launching an ambitious process of development which may earn it the status of middle-income country by 2025 are questions that articulate many pieces of research in the specialised literature concerning the contemporary experience of this African country.

Documenting development progress is a challenging task, due to the complexity and multiplicity of the factors at stake in each situation, and the fact that development analyses, in their different modalities, are often carried out on incomplete and in-progress projects renders it even more difficult to draw up conclusive diagnoses. In the Ethiopian case, development challenges are persistent, so when we refer to the evolution of its contemporary development experience, we do so from a position that assumes that these challenges and obstacles have not been fully overcome.

However, what is certain is that, because of experiences such as that of Ethiopia, research on the role of the state in development processes has returned to the forefront, particularly in relation to the challenges that the contemporary world economy places on peripheral-dependent economies. In fact, this renewed attention has particularly focused on Africa where, historically, countries have made the least progress towards the structural transformation of their economies. As such, the Ethiopian experience could be used to highlight many of the political challenges to processes of state-led development in the contemporary era, as it «stands out as a vitally important case of state-led development in Africa» (Lavers 2023, p. 3), and it contributes to underscore the considerable diversity in political configurations in the African continent.

This article seeks to delve deeper into the characterisation of the contemporary Ethiopian state as «developmental» and to underscore its central role in Ethiopia's most recent development process. In so doing, the state of art in the theoretical discussion concerning the role of the state in contemporary development processes will be discussed, with a particular focus on the African context. Then, the delimitation of the unit of analysis of this study will be presented, and a characterisation of Ethiopia will be provided. This, far from being exhaustive, aims to systematise some useful features to contextualise its contemporary development process. Finally, the most prominent features of the Ethiopian state's developmental ap-

proach will be examined and will be weighed against the classic notion of the «developmental state» to explore the foundations of the Ethiopian «developmentalism» and its limits.

## 2 The role of the state in leading development processes: relevance, progress and expectations

The onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a resurgent interest in state-led development<sup>1</sup> processes. The challenge of structural transformation and the importance of the state to development have returned to centre stage.

It could be argued that the literature on state-led development has traditionally suffered from a certain degree of methodological nationalism. But renewed interest in the role of the state in development processes, resulting from contemporary experiences of countries where relatively capable states have led, oriented or overseen periods of rapid economic development, has shed some light on new approaches to and perceptions of state action in development processes.

A prominent issue within these debates concerns the challenges of «late-late development»<sup>2</sup> (Lavers 2023) and how the contemporary world economy presents opportunities for structural transformation. Contemporary developmentalist-leaning states find themselves amongst a context of increasing international competition, because of the fragmentation of industrial production into global value chains, contested sovereignty and limited regulatory capacities derived from the imposition of decades of neoliberal policies. It is in this context that the state emerges as a key actor in promoting policies that address different institutional settings which, however, faces constraints that differ from those that the classic approach to the «developmental state» identified.

The concept «developmental state» began to gain prominence following the experience of Japan and other East Asian economies and was addressed in the works of Johnson (1982, 1999), White and Wade (1984), White (1988) and Evans (1989, 1995). Many definitions of the «developmental state» have since then been drafted, often adapted, and analysed, based on yet diverse contexts (Kohli 2004).

However, to date, insufficient attention has been devoted to political economy elements that underpin the state's ability and willingness to articulate said processes, particularly in contexts other than the East Asian experience. Considering contemporary debates on the role of the state and public intervention in develop-

- 1 Following Lavers (2023, p. 1), in this article the notion «state-led development» will be used, rather than the common term «developmental state» because, as he notes, «the concept of a developmental state is problematic in that it defines a particular state in terms of the outcomes it achieves rather than features of the state itself». Moreover, as Sindzingre (2004) contends, «developmental states» are historical entities, shaped by historical trajectories, whose features cannot be transposed as such to other contexts. In fact, it is worth reflecting on the empirical validity of replicating unique experiences in dissimilar, and even diverging, contexts. However, this would imply undertaking an exhaustive exercise of systematisation of each experience, which is far beyond the aim of this paper. The problematization of the conceptualisation of the «developmental state» and the difficulty of its formal replicability in experiences other than those of East Asian countries makes us opt, therefore, for a broader approach to examine the role of the state in contemporary development processes.
- 2 According to Gerschenkron (1962), Amsden (1992), Thompson (1996), or Austin (2015), late-late industrialisers can benefit from learning from the successes and failures of earlier industrialisers, but also face the challenge of catching up with a continuously advancing technological frontier and a more competitive international economic context.

ment processes,<sup>3</sup> this section aims to shed light on the centrality of state action in late-late development contexts.

Assuming that no state fully matches the «ideal type» in terms of its ascription to the «developmental state» classic paradigm, but that the paradigm itself —and, particularly, the debates emerging within it— remain useful for understanding evolving trajectories of state-led development, the aim of this section is to formalise a categorisation of elements within the classic «developmental state» paradigm that could serve to identify concepts applicable to substantial experiences of state-led development processes in a context of late-late development.

The seminal inquiry by Johnson (1982) suggested that the «developmental state» was characterized by taking on «developmental» functions.<sup>4</sup> Wade (2018, pp. 524-529) provided further insights and a systematic review of the main features of the developmental model in East Asian economies. According to him, there were four dimensions that articulated the developmental incline of these states:

- i. At the ideological level, there was a consensus around the national development project —what Thurbon (2014) identified as the «developmental mindset»—. Mkandawire (2001) went further and defined that «mindset» as an «ideological hegemony», that was transformed into a hegemonic project within which «development» was as the «mission» of the state.
- ii. At the policy level, the state made use of an array of industrial steerage instruments which provided support to strategic sectors and products, encouraged diversification via productive investment and restrained non-productive wealth accumulation, which passed by disciplining capital to the mandate of the state.
- iii. State capacity benefited from institutional arrangements, as a result of the so-called «embedded autonomy» (Evans 1995). This implied the centralisation of bureaucratic power around industrial planning, with the aim of implementing a strategic vision for the economy's future growth. This configuration favoured the generation of a coherent state structure, that prevented the state from using its authority in a predatory manner.
- iv. Arrangements such as the «centralisation of power» and «land reform» were carried out. These «political settlements» prompted the penetration of the societies by the state and disciplined citizen incorporation into the state's developmental «mission», generating the necessary social capital that legitimised citizen's consent to the rulers and loyalty to the developmental project.

In sum, developmental states were characterised by both ideological and structural components, that helped translate developmental ambition and elite consensus into effective policy outcomes.

3 Researchers such as Mazzucato (2013), Juhász *et al.* (2023), or Rodrik and Stiglitz (2024) have contributed to bringing this discussion up to date in diverse «developing» contexts.

4 For Johnson, the «developmental state» filled an intermediate space between the «planning state» (characteristic of the Soviet experience) and the «regulatory state» (present in developed capitalist economies during the post-war growth phase).

Yet, in contexts alien to the East Asian experience, the suitability and adaptability of developmentalism was questioned. Particularly in Africa, the literatures on state-led development were rather pessimistic about the prospects of African states making any positive contribution to structural transformation (Lavers 2023). The «impossibility thesis» set forth by Mkandawire (2001, p. 289) was critical of this conception and argued that

[a] notable feature of the discourse on the state and development in Africa is the dilemma between an analytical tradition that insists on the impossibility of developmental states in Africa and a prescriptive literature that presupposes their existence. States whose capacity to carry out any national project is denied at a theoretical —or at a diagnostic— level are exhorted at the prescriptive level to assume functions that are, *ex definitione*, beyond their capacity<sup>5</sup> or political will.

It is worth noting that many failed experiences in terms of state-led development were as much the consequence of the existence of an adverse international context, characterised by external economic shocks and the forced implementation of structural adjustment policies,<sup>6</sup> as the inherent limitations that African states experienced because of their peculiar journey through state formation and nation-building processes.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it has also been documented that the main hindrance to the success of developmental attempts in African states has been more closely related to prejudiced and unfunded analyses and ideological inconsistencies.

Besides, the «impossibility thesis» can be contested by suggesting that some contemporary experiences show that it is possible for African states to acquire the capacities needed to promote development: it is, indeed, «possible» to identify countries in Africa whose ideological inclination was clearly developmentalist and pursued policies that produced high rates of growth.

Hence, for us to focus on wider politics and praxis of developmentalism in Africa, the point of departure should be that which considers that the now «widespread calls for African states to adopt industrial policy in pursuit of structural transformation [...] look set to go unanswered» (Hickey 2023, p. 225). This statement implies that further research needs to be conducted to bridge the gap between the historical efforts to account for «the failure of states in Africa» and contemporary approaches that seek to ground the analysis into historical, structural and material contexts. Recent attempts to detect common stylised facts in the variety of strategies that may be found across African experiences might shed light onto these debates, which have been followed by endeavours to identify the wider politics of developmentalism in Africa and to reflect upon the tensions emerging between state-building and the contemporary context of late-late development. It is at this point that we place Ethiopia's contemporary state-led development experience.

5 African states' capacity, mainly their infrastructural power (Mann 1984), is questioned, without very much considering the effects that pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial state formation had on undermining their autonomy and cohesion (Callaghy 1987, Herbst 2000, Van de Walle 2001).

6 The imposition of «disciplinary neoliberalism» (Gill 1995) via the implementation of structural adjustment programs since the 1980s offered external actors considerable influence over political and economic governance in African states in ways that profoundly affected their social and political configurations (Harrison 2010). Hickey (2023) has highlighted how many state agencies that were identified as «pockets of efficiency» amidst dysfunctional state apparatuses were those privileged by the International Financial Institutions with the capacities and mandates to deliver on a heavily conscribed political agenda in an attempt to grant states in Africa a legitimacy that was lacking within the neoliberal economic order (Mkandawire 2014). This implied that initial attempts at implementing nation-wide developmental projects in the region were conditioned by external priorities.

7 Some of this research emphasises the fact that the prevalence of dynamics of political patronage, clientelism and informal institutions in the continent is «as much a reflection of the absence of structural transformation and capitalist development as an indication of anything distinct about African political systems» (Khan 2010, Whitfield *et al.* 2015, in Lavers 2023, p. 30).



### 3 Unit of analysis and methodology

Ethiopia constitutes a peculiarity among African states. The fact that it was the only indigenous African state that survived through the colonial period commonly sets it apart from the narratives of development referred to the rest of the African countries (Clapham 2006). Besides, since the 2000s, Ethiopia has registered a record growth rate that placed it amongst the fastest growing economies in the world. That striking record could be linked to the effects of the implementation of its most remarkable development scheme, the Agricultural Development-Led Industrialisation (ADLI) strategy, led by the government of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

To examine the role that the EPRDF's dirigisme played in improving Ethiopia's development performance via the application of the ADLI strategy, the unit of analysis has been delimited from 1994, the year in which the current configuration of the Ethiopian state was institutionalised with the coming of power of the EPRDF, to 2015, the year that marked a significant turning point in ADLI, as the strategy's priorities were reformulated. This renders a sufficient timespan to study the role of the state in contemporary Ethiopia and to demarcate the parameters in which the EPRDF's developmental approach occurs. Our research objective is to analyse the role that the Ethiopian government of the EPRDF had on this process, which leads us to question whether the Ethiopian state, led by the EPRDF, followed a developmental approach. To this end, a case-study methodology together with an elite interview inquiry method are used.

Case study research is relevant when «answers to research questions require an in-depth and extensive description of a social phenomenon» (Yin 2018, p. 33), as it is the case of processes of state-led development due to their multifaceted nature. The strength of this type of methodology lies in the insights that can be gained from the in-depth study of a concrete and particular reality (Simons 2014), as well as in the fact that it makes use of a variety of research tools (official documents, interviews, direct observation...) (Yin 2018), which enrich the research outcomes as they allow for direct approximation to the complexity of the reality studied. In the clarifying words of Stake (1999, p. 20): «[the case study] very rarely leads to an entirely new understanding, but to a more precise one» and is guided by the results obtained with the aim of grounding the theory (Corbin & Strauss 1990) in a specific context (Wuyts 1992a, 1992b).

The case study methodology was operationalised with the use of «elite interviews»<sup>8</sup> (Beamer 2002; Harvey 2010, 2011; Liu 2018) to key informants as an inquiry method, which was carried out

8 The concept of «elite» is variously defined in the academic literature and can refer to different categories depending on the field in which the term is used. «Elite» status, in any case, usually comes from the possession of knowledge and prestige (Liu 2018) and proximity to the object of study, rather than being individuals chosen anonymously or at random.

during fieldwork.<sup>9</sup> Semi-structured interviews<sup>10</sup> were conducted the design of a theoretical sampling<sup>11</sup> (Wiedemann 1995). Our interview protocol was defined according to Creswell and Creswell (2018): extensive pre-research was carried out to collect the necessary data for the sampling frame to identify and conduct the first key informant interviews. The way the sample was defined was governed by the recommendation of an expert or qualified informant—so-called «reputational», «snowball» or «multiplier effect» case selection (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 29)—. The virtue of this type of inquiry is that it allows working with much smaller sample sizes and ceases when a sufficient saturation point is reached. During our research, we assessed the relevance, reliability and validity of each data source using both a theoretical and methodological triangulation procedure and used them to construct a chain of evidence of the research.

The next section briefly presents an overview of some contextual elements in the form of stylised facts that seek to situate the analysis in a concrete and substantive reality.

## 4 Ethiopia, capitalism and (under) development. Some stylised facts

The stylised facts described below do not aim to act as a substitute for a more detailed historical analysis of past trends and changes in the Ethiopian economy and its contemporary situation, but rather have the purpose to systematise several elements that have been identified as essential for the understanding of Ethiopia's recent development process and the role that the state may have played in it.

### 4.1. GDP growth without significant structural transformations

The characteristics and dynamics of economic growth in Ethiopia resemble those of other low-income countries. In the case of Ethiopia, as mentioned above, the take-off of economic activity can be traced back to 2002 (World Bank 2023). In the preceding decades, and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, economic growth in Ethiopia was not absent, but limited. This was induced by its «exogenous» nature, highly dependent on increases in labour productivity while the contribution of capital accumulation to the process was very low. This type of growth was also «erratic», in the sense that periods of accelerated growth were followed by periods of deep recessions that limited the possibilities of generating a cumulative and sustained economic growth over time.

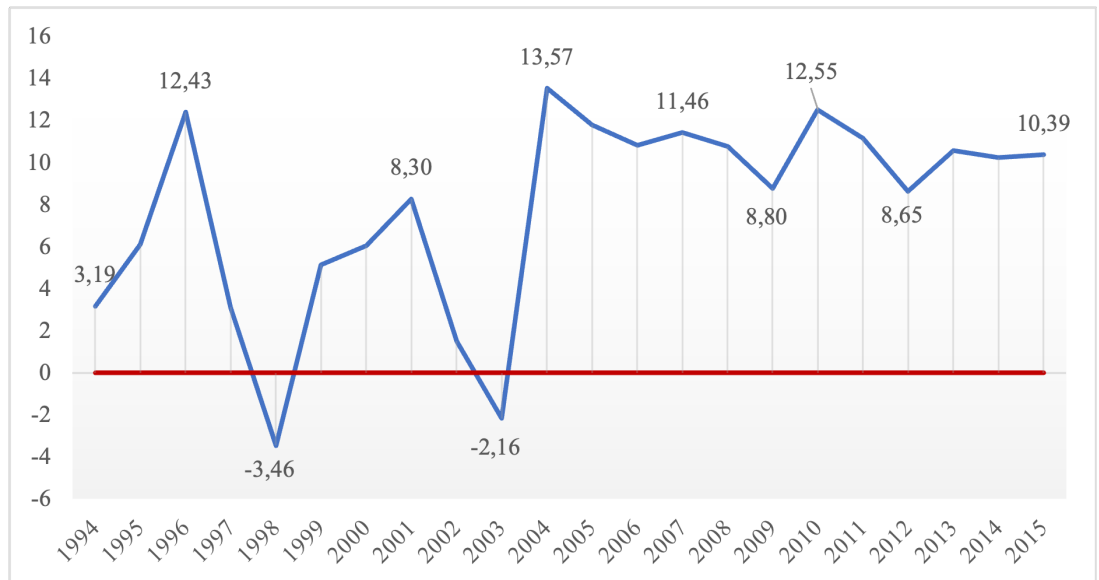
9 On occasions when we were unable to conduct the desired interviews, we used official documents as substitutes (Stake 1999) for those records of government activities that we were unable to observe directly.

10 Our key informants were defined according to their degree of involvement and participation in the formulation of the ADLI development strategy, or in its monitoring and evaluation. Twenty interviews were conducted between January and February 2020 to members of the following sectors: Academia, donor agencies, donor countries, Ethiopian governmental institutions (ministries, and specialised agencies), international financial institutions, international organisations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), economic development consultancy, and think tanks. The interviews were done in English, recorded, and anonymised following in accordance with several handbooks on good practices on data protection. This ensured the confidentiality of the testimony of our interviewees.

11 Theoretical or qualitative sampling works with small numbers of people, who tend to be chosen intentionally (Creswell & Creswell 2018), as social processes have a logic and coherence that random sampling may fail to perceive and capture. Theoretical sampling is composed of two dimensions: one is the theoretical saturation, which acts as a limit indicating when sampling ends; the other is the theoretical coding, which is used as a technique for interpreting texts and data categorisation procedures.



These trends have continued into the present era. Although the increase in growth levels in contemporary Ethiopia is much higher —averaging between 10 and 12 % growth per annum (World Bank 2023)—, it can still be observed that the growth trend is neither stable nor continuous, but rather inconsistent (see Figure 1, below). From 1994 to 2002, moments of low growth (1994, with 3.19 % growth compared to the previous year; 1997, with 3.13 %, 2002, with 1.51 %) alternated with moments of very high growth (1996, with 12.43 % or 2001 with 8.30 %) and even with episodes of negative growth (as in 1998, with -3.46 %) (World Bank 2023).



**Figure 1**

Evolution of real GDP growth, in percentage, 1990-2015

Source: author's calculations based on World Bank's World Development Indicators Database (2023).

From 2002 onwards, except for 2003, when negative growth of 2.16 % was recorded, the trend has been lifted upwards, with very high values that have only fallen on two occasions (in 2009, with a recorded growth of 8.8 % over the previous year and in 2012, with a recorded growth of 8.65 % over the previous figure) (World Bank 2023). Yet, as we described at the beginning of this section, structural change is only recently taking place (Martins 2014), but not following the «traditional» path: structural change in Ethiopia has evolved towards a dual economy where the services sector is becoming increasingly important, due to the surge in construction activities.<sup>12</sup>

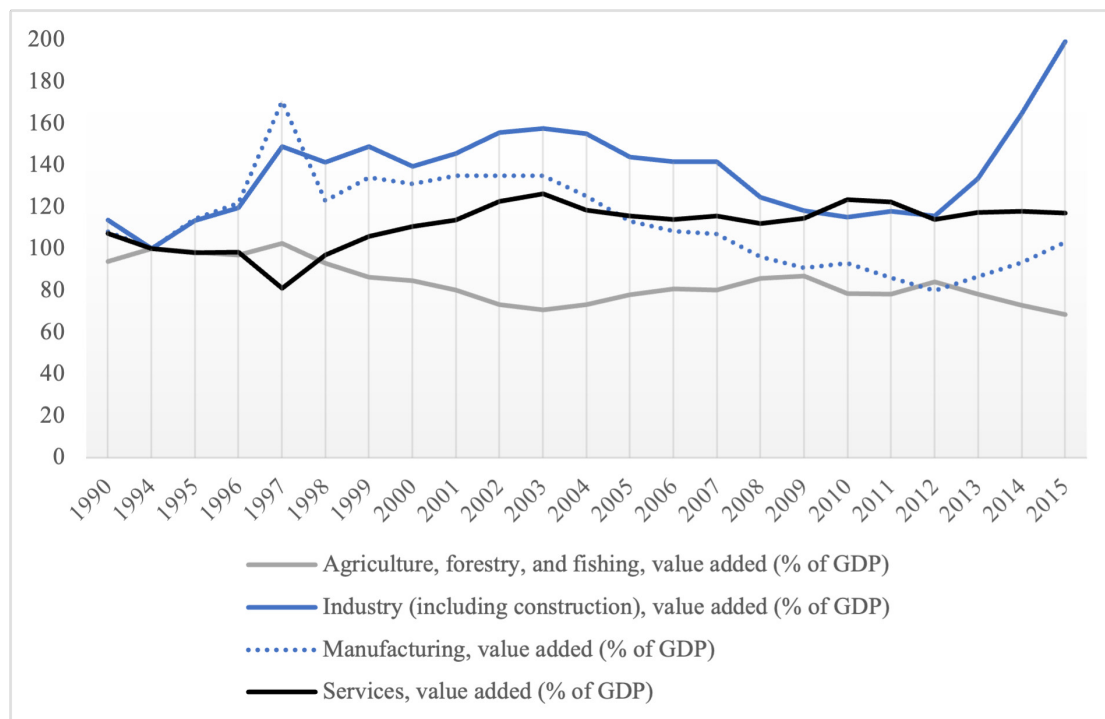
## 4.2. A society of agricultural workers

### The importance of the agricultural sector in the Ethiopian dual economy

The main component of overall Ethiopian economic growth at the beginning of the period of analysis was the agriculture, forestry,

<sup>12</sup> However, this information should be treated with caution, given the effect that inflation has had on the recent performance of these indicators in the Ethiopian case.

and fisheries sector, which contributed 52.7 % of the total value added generated in the country in 1994, followed by the services sector, which accounted for 33.8 % of value-added generation in the same year (World Bank 2023), as shown in Figure 2, below. The industrial and manufacturing sectors were less active, at 8.18 % and 4.27 %, respectively, of total value generation, also in 1994 (World Bank 2023).

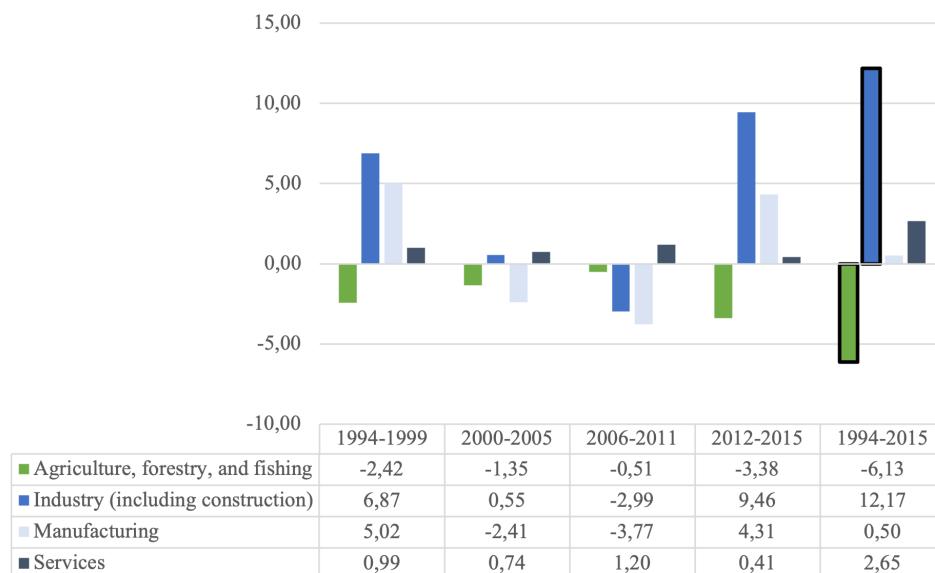


**Figure 2**

Economic structure of Ethiopia: value added by sector, as a percentage of GDP, 1994-2015 (1994 = 100)

Source: author's calculations based on World Bank's World Development Indicators Database (2023).

From 2002 onwards, the trend started to reverse, and at the heart of that shift were the policies adopted by the government of Meles Zenawi within the framework of an «enhanced» ADLI, in which the participation of the industrial sector in the economy was promoted. As a result, the added value generated by industry averaged around 11.40 % in the period 2002-2010 (World Bank 2023). During the same period, the contribution of agriculture declined to 41.46 %, and services increased to almost 40 % of the value added generated in the Ethiopian economy (World Bank 2023). Industry increased its share to 16.3 % in 2015 —especially due to the expansion of the construction sector, spurred by the boost in infrastructural development— and services finally overtook agriculture as the main sector of value generation in the Ethiopian economy, with a contribution of 39.55 % in 2015 (and an average share of 40.15 % in the 2010-2015 period) (World Bank 2023).

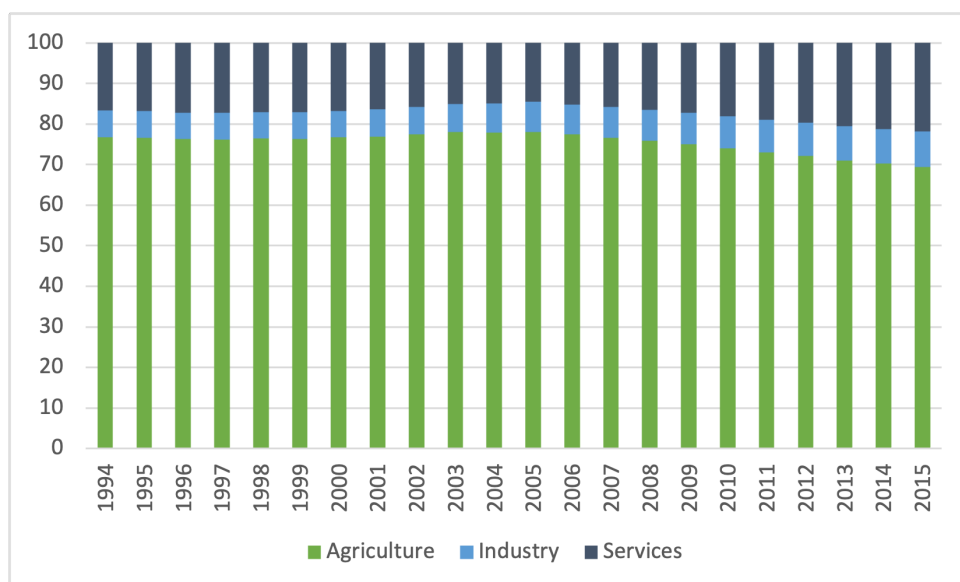


**Table 1**

Mean cumulative rate of sector contribution to GDP in value added, 1994-2015

Source: author's calculations based on World Bank's World Development Indicators Database (2023).

While the structural shift towards services has been one of the main determinants of contemporary economic growth in Ethiopia, the presence of the agricultural sector in the Ethiopian productive structure is still essential for economic growth, as can be deduced from the labour force participation in the agricultural sector in which the shift of labour from agriculture to the service sector is nonetheless modest. In 1994, the agricultural sector employed 76.76 % of the population, and only in 2015 figures in employment in the agricultural sector were below 70 % of total employment (World Bank 2023), as illustrated in Figure 3, below.



**Figure 3**

Employment by sector, as a percentage of total employment, based on the International Labour Organisation's estimation model, 1994-2015

Source: author's calculations based on World Bank's World Development Indicators Database (2023).

### 4.3. State-society relations: diversity, multi-ethnicity and patronage politics

Ethiopia is a large and diverse country, not only regarding agroecological conditions, but mainly in social terms, as it is deeply divided by lines of «ethnicity», «language» and «culture». Successive governments have struggled to implement a political regime that could satisfy a complex patchwork of ethnically configured substates: state-society relations are intertwined with «ethnicity», which conditions economic relations in the country and shapes the power relations underlying Ethiopia's contemporary development process. In fact, «ethnicity» has commonly been used as criterion by the federal government to prioritise the allocation of development funds to the *Kilil* (regions).

At the same time, the state's historical hegemony over rural Ethiopian society and control over land and the agricultural base of the EPRDF are logics that have shaped state action in Ethiopia: they have limited it, but they have also made it possible. In Ethiopian society, the importance of agricultural workers as subjects of development is crucial both in economic terms and in the way they relate to —and integrate into— the political system: peasant agriculture has historically been the backbone of the Ethiopian economy and agriculture was indeed seen as a political issue, rather than a purely productive one.

## 5 The developmental configuration of the Ethiopian state

As noted above, the EPRDF's main policy objective was to achieve accelerated economic development for the benefit of the Ethiopian population (Arkebe Oqubay 2019). Thus, in 1994, the first distinctive approach of the EPRDF regime to developmentalism, the agriculture-based development strategy, and ADLI, was devised. It sought to place small-scale farmers at the centre of the entire development project.

Meles Zenawi, the ideologue of contemporary Ethiopian developmentalism, was the prime mover of the developmental path in Ethiopia, and during his time serving as president, from 1991 to 1995, and as prime minister, from 1995 until 2012, regarded its implementation as a necessary condition for the survival of the EPRDF's political project. Table 2, below, systematises the main stages of developmentalism under the leadership of Meles Zenawi.

<i><b>Period</b></i>	<i><b>Development plan in progress</b></i>	<i><b>Statehood dynamics</b></i>	<i><b>Milestones in the development process</b></i>
1991-2000	Core ADLI (1994-2002)	Transitional period. Constitutional reform (1995) and introduction of a multi-party coalition under the aegis of the EPRDF	Dismantling of the socialist planned economy of the previous regime and partial liberalisation of the economy. Definition of the «state's leading» role
2000-2005	Enhanced ADLI	Reformulation of the Ethiopian state as «developmental»	Temporary suspension of the envisaged programme of economic liberalisation; reorganisation of economic institutions
2005-2015	Enhanced ADLI	Materialisation of the «developmental coalition» between the EPRDF, the state and the Ethiopian people. Developmentalism becomes the hegemonic discourse	Shift in focus of development strategy and acceleration of development process; openness to private sector participation and foreign direct investment (FDI) <sup>13</sup>

**Table 2**

Sequencing of the dynamics of statehood and chronology of developmentalism

Source: author based on Vaughan (2011) and Weis (2016).

## 5.1. Development as a mission

The Ethiopian state presented unique challenges that required an adaptation of the classic developmental state model. On one side, the ADLI strategy, in its initial (core) definition sought agriculture as the driver of economic growth. It was expected to provide the productive and fiscal impetus for industrialisation and structural transformation. On the other side was the state, which was expected to act expertly in the management and allocation of resources and, in addition, to focus on the promotion of labour-intensive industrial sectors that made use of agricultural inputs to maximise the positive effects of productive and consumption linkages.

Even so, Meles Zenawi agreed with the theoretical assumptions of the classic developmental state that industrialisation ought to be the ultimate means to achieve economic transformation. He argued that only a «strong» and «activist» state could «unlock» development by taking on two main «missions» (De Waal 2013a; Lefort 2013, p. 460). First, to centralise «state rents» and to «allocate them productively» to long-term development goals (De Waal 2013a; Lefort 2013, p. 460). Then, to «guide» the private sector away from its natural trend towards concentrating on «rentier ac-

13 For an in-depth analysis of the new logics of FDI in Ethiopia, the role of Chinese investment, and its influence on Ethiopia's most recent industrialisation process, see Brautigam *et al.* (2018), Fantu Cheru and Arkebe Oqubay (2019).

tivities» and to reorient it towards the long-term goal of «value creation» (De Waal 2013a; Lefort 2013, p. 460). To achieve this, a third element was necessary, namely the «hegemony of developmentalist discourse», as a set of internalised assumptions, in the Gramscian sense of the concept (De Waal 2013a, pp. 153-154).

In Ethiopia, the association of the state with the developmentalist project, and thus the assumption of the developmental nature of the state, took place from within the government (D-OI1),<sup>14</sup> which aspired to have the state become the main architect of development. In this context, the EPRDF harmonised the development process with the ideology of the dominant party in such a way that the party automatically became the guarantor of the interests and aspirations of the people. The EPRDF had long understood the great political potential of the coincidence of interests between the peasant population and the government (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003):

in developing countries like Ethiopia, the establishment of a developmental state requires a stable ground, in which the mass agricultural population would form a political party that would opt for development and a coalition amongst its society [...]. The need for a mass political party in alliance with the population is necessary for the continuity of the developmental project through the ownership of political power by the ruling party via periodic elections, with the aim of combining the principles of the developmental state with those of democracy (Meles Zenawi 2006, p. 20).

These ideas contributed to the instauration of the hegemony of the discourse of Ethiopian developmentalism, that fitted perfectly into its developmental mission:

economic growth and development are not just a mere economic necessity but are at the core of national security<sup>15</sup> and therefore agriculture receives all the attention of the economic development process. Moreover, the democratic process is equally important, and the development process depends on it. The success of the party in terms of development and democratisation depends on the party's alliance with the people and the revolutionary democracy it stands for (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF 2012).

Paradoxically, Meles Zenawi's theory of the Ethiopian developmental state (Meles Zenawi 2006) did not specify key elements of its strategy and political action —which were, at times, conflicting—, because they would most likely have invalidated the theory itself (Lefort 2013). Contradictory in its expectations, the ambiguity around the conceptualisation of development produced the politicisation of the concept of the «developmental state» by the EPRDF authorities and Meles Zenawi himself both at the regional and at the national level. At the regional level, politicisation of development responded to the imperative imposed on local government officials to identify beneficiaries of development project investments that would pledge allegiance to the developmental project. Meanwhile, at the national level, the politicisation of the concept took a more

14 The acronyms D-OI1 to DS1 correspond to the codification of our interviewees and are detailed in Annex I.

15 The 2001 National Security Strategy does indeed state that economic development is a priority for national security (De Waal 2018). And Meles Zenawi himself, in his White Paper on Foreign Affairs and Security, identified rapid economic development (De Waal 2013b) as a key challenge for the country's security.



ideological turn (Planel 2016) that was used to legitimise Meles Zenawi's personalistic rule.

## 5.2. Legitimising developmentalism in Ethiopia

The authority of Meles Zenawi's project emanated from two sources: the first one was the legitimacy granted by the sound economic performance derived from the implementation of the developmental project; the second one could be traced back to the rural agricultural origins of the base of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the main party of the EPRDF coalition. The TPLF allegedly worked for the benefit of the agricultural workers, so development was assimilated to a social contract that the party used to grant the acquiescence of most of the Ethiopian population, had predominantly rural origins and was closely linked to agricultural production.

The EPRDF had long understood the great political potential of the coincidence of interests between the peasant population who gained from socio-economic development, and the party itself, which derived its support and legitimacy from the development process. In other words, during political reform, the EPRDF tried to portray itself as the sole provider of benefits to the people in exchange for ensuring its continuity in power (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003).

The process of contemporary state configuration in Ethiopia during the 2000s was impaired by an unfinished project of the creation of an «imagined community» (Cramer *et al.* 2020, p. 247): economic development in Ethiopia had been historically challenged by conflict for centuries. The major causes of this conflict were grounded in the country's political economy, underscored by competition for power and resources among the political elite (Alemayehu Geda 2023, p. 12) and was exacerbated by rapid population growth, accelerating urbanisation, continuing poverty, and rampant inflation. The EPRDF got committed to prioritising economic development and securing it to ensure the legitimacy that the development gains conferred its government. The evolutionary nature of the ADLI strategy can be understood as part of this continuing process of acquiescence of the government's legitimacy by the population.

In this context, it is relevant to note that the configuration of Ethiopia's developmentalism was not only driven by economic logics but was mainly determined by political elements. This scenario explains much of the subsequent reformulation of the enhanced development strategy and the revise of the developmental nature of the Ethiopian state.

## 5.3. The final throes of Ethiopian developmentalism

Meles Zenawi's death coincided with a liberal reorientation of the development strategy (Planel 2016). Ethiopia had no choice to

«survive» in the era of globalisation but to undertake «structural change» and to «apply the free market economy» (Lefort 2012, p. 682), a rather distinct developmental state-driven approach that was presented as inseparable from progress towards the achievement of development goals.

This led to a shift of the government's discourse on the order of priorities (Bach 2011, Hagmann & Abbink 2011, Vaughan & Mesfin Gebremichael 2011): the very last version of the Ethiopian developmentalist approach combined economic liberalisation, which originated from the idea of Ethiopia's ineluctable integration into the world market economy, with strong economic dirigisme, underpinned by the need for state control of both the public and private sectors of the economy (Nallet 2015). The government's purpose was not to create an accessible playing field to maximise competition, following neoliberal tenets, but to play an active role in most spheres of economic activity, as part of a controlled transition from a pre-capitalist economy to a «sustainable» form of capitalism that in the end would have a «positive developmental impact» (Vaughan & Mesfin Gebremichael 2011, p. 31).

#### **5.4. Does the Ethiopian state fit the developmental blueprint?**

This categorisation of the Ethiopian state is not without controversy (De Waal 2018, Arkebe Oqubay 2019, Hauge & Chang 2019). In this regard, Aaron Tesfaye (2017) points to two very enlightening ideas:

on the one hand, the political elite of the state can be identified to be ideologically committed to development and has created organizational complexes in which expert bureaucratic agencies collaborate with the private sectors to drive national economic transformation. On the other hand, since the foundation of the federal republic, the state has ideologically promoted development and has conceived as its mission the attainment of high rates of capital accumulation and economic growth.

From these assumptions, the characterisation of the Ethiopian state as developmental is evident: the existence of a developmentalist ideology and a visible attempt to implement policies aimed at increasing economic growth are elements directly identifiable with those developmental state traits outlined in section 2 of this article. Yet, if the dimensions of state capacity and autonomy are considered, the characterisation is less clear. Five ideas can be used to support that perception: the very nature of the state and the political settlements within it, the close link between the party in power and the state, the state's infrastructural capacity, the private sector's engagement in the developmental process and, finally, the persistence of corruption, ethnic-based privileges and «crony capitalism» (Alemayehu Geda 2023).

To begin with, as Hauge and Chang (2019) highlight, the orientation of the Ethiopian state is not necessarily «developmental». In fact, as can be inferred from the work of Lavers (2023), the Ethiopian state would rather be classified as an activist state that is committed to developmental action as part of its state policy. Likewise, authors such as Weis (2016, p. 77) would rather use the notion «vanguard capitalism» to refer to the configuration of state-society relations in contemporary Ethiopia and would speak of «a system combining the expansive economic logic of capitalist markets with the centralising political logic of a dominant party steeped in the Leninist tradition of vanguard thinking».

In relation to the above, the «effective merging of party and state» (Aalen & Tronvoll 2009) made Ethiopia a country ruled by a monolithic party-state (Clapham 2009): the EPRDF was the metonymy of the Ethiopian state. Lefort (2012, p. 703) tellingly affirms that, «although the party initially led the state, the former quickly swallowed the latter». Therefore, it could be argued —perhaps adventurously— that, rather than a developmental state, what existed in Ethiopia was a «developmental party» that promoted a state-led developmental approach: the developmental mission was in fact carried out by the ruling party and its ties, and not by the state apparatuses.<sup>16</sup>

Third, the Ethiopian state had significant limitations in its infrastructural capacity —for instance, to implement economic policies effectively— which required coherence within governmental and bureaucratic institutions. These attempts were hampered by the capture and corporatization of the state by the interests of ethnic elites (Alemayehu Geda 2023), as we will discuss below, which prevented it from fully utilizing its autonomy, and by the poor capacity building of the state's structures (CS1, D-CD1, D-OI3, GE1, and ON-CD1). Despite this being one of the key conditions for the proper functioning of developmentalism, the «autonomy of the technocracy» (Lefort 2013, p. 464) was never really fulfilled, and the formulation of development objectives became dogmatic and directly led by Meles Zenawi, in an authoritarian drift that had *ukase* («elitist centralism») as its highest expression.

Fourth, the limited participation of the private sector in the development process until very recently can be understood in Meles Zenawi's ideological commitments and his personal reluctance to collaborate with the domestic capitalist sector, thus disengaging from one of the basic principles of the classic approach to the developmental state, in which the relationship between the state and certain private enterprises was defined by their submission to the broader developmental process.

Two of our key informants explained the rationale behind the state's reluctance to collaborate with the private sector:

[historically in Ethiopia] the private sector has been seen as greedy, rent-seeking, and eager to profit from the benefits of aid and government

16 Nevertheless, this analysis proves much more complex: on the one hand, because of changes in the party-state boundaries and, on the other, because of the relative and evolving importance and authority of party and state structures *vis-à-vis* each other. It is also necessary to consider changes in the political weight of parties within the ruling coalition. It is worth noting, too, how power at the top shifted from rule by committee within the EPRDF to personal rule led by the figure of Meles Zenawi.

surplus production [...] because this has happened in the past when the private sector was involved in the fight against poverty. This is why the private sector has always been viewed with suspicion and scepticism (ON-CD2, ON-CD3).

Another key informant (GE2) who had been part of the cabinet that designing the ADLI strategy argued that «the state had a role to play in an economy in which the private sector had no space since it was not yet ready [to participate]». He gave the example of state-controlled agricultural cooperatives:

if the government releases control there would be chaos because nobody can play its role, not even the private sector because it is not yet sufficiently developed. If [private initiative] wants to free itself from government control, it needs strong regulatory institutions [which do not yet exist] (GE2).

To corroborate the above testimonies, we interviewed a World Bank official in Ethiopia with extensive knowledge of the Ethiopian developmental experience:

Most [economic] activities [in Ethiopia] are state-owned, *which can give us an idea of their efficiency...*<sup>17</sup> The lack of private sector activity can be attributed to the lack of market incentives and private initiative... The absence of business, business incentives and private initiative results in low value addition... There are also some policy decisions that explain the lack of private initiative, because the government... limits the efficient allocation of resources (OI2).

In any case, it is difficult to find a solid basis for the creation of an «alliance» or «symbiotic» relation between the state and the domestic private sector, given the country's excessive dependence on state bodies and public companies as key participants in economic activities.

Finally, although some pockets of efficiency (Evans 1989), such as Ethiopian Airlines or Ethio telecom (CS1), could be identified the reality is that the normal functioning of the Ethiopian government's bodies and agencies was disrupted by high levels of corruption, which undermined the state's agency and developmental purpose: «Corruption is visible throughout the political chain: in control, in resource mobilisation, in planning and in budget transparency» (GE1). The state administration (and its accountability mechanisms) was also affected by corruption, especially at the lower levels:

the money raised is often not used for community services... Then, also, government agencies have many budgetary limitations because that money is not used for what appears in the budget and is not directed to logistical purposes... The government's strategies have a very important extractive component because they only seek to obtain resources without them reverting to the people... And there are also false reports prepared by the government to disguise the [economic] objectives [that appear in the development strategy] (ON-CD2, ON-CD3).

According to another key informant (CS1), the presence of clientelist networks and an oligarchy linked to the Tigrayan and Amhara<sup>18</sup>

17 Emphasis added. This narrative is in line with the neoliberal discourse of the international financial institutions on the role of the public sector and its involvement in economic activities.

- 18 The historical source of political power located in the highlands around the region of Tigray, which is also the region of origin of part of Ethiopia's political class. It was also one of the poorest, but politically pivotal in that it was instrumental in the defeat of the military junta regime of the Derg (1974-1990) and the victory against Eritrea in the 1998-2000 war. Amhara, on the other hand, is home to the country's predominant ethnic group and is also one of the biggest sources of economic reproduction Ethiopia.
- 19 To try to simplify this very complex issue in historical and political terms, we can mention one of the means to seek social peace in Ethiopia, a social peace that would allow the generation of a solid political structure to articulate the development process: the «national question», on which the TPLF focused, sought the recognition and «positive discrimination» of the different ethnic and national groups that made up the Ethiopian state (Clapham 2009). The TPLF wanted to generate such unity by broadening the notion of «Ethiopian nationality» to encompass all the different ethnic and national groups within the state (Markakis 2011). The TPLF believed that both democracy and the lasting integrity of the Ethiopian polity and development project could only be ensured through the recognition of the rights of the country's diverse ethnic and sub-national realities, an approach they called «ethnic federalism» (Abbink 1995), which Meles Zenawi rescued to justify the integration of the ethnic dimension as an instrument of political power within state action.
- 20 The notion of «style of development», rather than the concept of «mode of development», most used in the Anglo-Saxon tradition (see Weis 2016), is used following Graciarena (1976) and Pinto (1976) as it serves to illustrate a specific modality of capital accumulation; that is, the historical embodiment of a particular «development model», which is adapted to the characteristics of a particular national experience. A «development model» (Graciarena 1976, Pinto 1976), in turn, refers to the historical modality of capital accumulation, *i.e.*, the spatial and temporal concretion of a specific development system, with idiosyncratic structural features that make it distinct from other historical development experiences.

ethnic groups is «very visible» in the country: «Much of the money that had entered the country in the form of official development assistance (ODA) had gone to enlarge the wealth of a specific elite». The struggle of the state's developmental project against the private sector's rent-seeking incline could not contain the government's own rent-seeking propensity towards ODA and other sources of funding the development process. Precisely, that the above-mentioned elitist centralism, which constrained the political autonomy of the regions for fear of a balkanization of the state<sup>19</sup> but used «ethnicity» as the basis to allocate investments for development purposes (CS1, GE1, ON-CD2, and ON-CD3), conditioned the achievement of the development objectives set by the EPRDF government itself.

From all the above, it could be inferred that what existed in Ethiopia was a strong state with relative autonomy, which designed its development priorities and implemented its policies in a relatively sovereign manner. This notwithstanding, the state also faced challenges related to political instability, due to tensions amongst the ruling elite that defied its cohesion; its limited capacity in terms of infrastructural and bureaucratic capabilities, and the lack of embedded autonomy and of an efficient bureaucracy isolated from partisan interests, cronyism and corruption.

Thus, the ideological, political, and instrumental contradictions of the EPRDF's action have shaped the configuration of the Ethiopian developmental project. The politicisation and adaptation of the classic notion of the «developmental state» to the Ethiopian reality was due to the need for the EPRDF to legitimise its mandate and, above all, to ensure control over the surplus generated by economic growth.

## 6 Concluding remarks

The Ethiopian style<sup>20</sup> of development is defined by the interaction of four articulated determinants: «state-society relations», mediated by the «ADLI strategy's institutional framework» in a «particular historical context» under a «specific mode of production». It would be interesting to place the Ethiopian experience in direct conversation with other countries tackling similar challenges of late-late development, as it can help raising relevant questions about the potential for such processes to play out elsewhere.

Despite the inadequacies of state power as an instrument of development, which is where much of the answer to the riddle of Ethiopia's failure lies, it has nonetheless emerged as the basic agent of capital accumulation and structural change. However, it is worth noting that in its present form, the state is in fact a thoroughly modern creation and that the state-building project is far from complete.



These issues have exerted a profound influence on the possibilities and limits of accumulation and broader development in Ethiopia.

In sum, labelling the EPRDF-governed state as «developmental» offers little insight into the nature of Ethiopia's economic transition, as it implies an assumption of the neutrality of developmental economic institutions when, in fact, they are highly politicised structures, reflecting long struggles within the nature and direction of the state. Even though it may be possible to assert that the Ethiopian state acquired developmental traits during the 1994-2015 period, the characterisation of the state as «developmental» was not more than a myth (De Waal 2018), that was used by Meles Zenawi's to justify his very own personalist political project.

Indeed, if there is one thing that characterises the Ethiopian state's developmental mission is the self-interested and adapted combination of the EPRDF's centralising political logic, strong state dirigisme and a selective application of neoliberal principles. At the root of this fusion is the party's monopolisation of state-society relations, which allowed it to capture the development rent surplus. This is what gives significance to the mutual reinforcing between the political dimension of the development process, materialised in the state's actions to maintain its legitimacy, and the economic dimension, which sought to accommodate a particular characterisation of the Ethiopian state to favour capital accumulation. Both dimensions are inextricably linked, and it is within that coalescence that the limits of the Ethiopian state-led development experience should be understood.

## 7 Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the funding provided by Complutense University of Madrid and Santander Bank in the CT17/17-CT18/18 call for pre-doctoral grants without which this research would have not been possible.

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## 9 Annex I: list of coded interviews

<b>Code</b>	<b>Role or position</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Date of first interview</b>
D-OI1	Programme Coordinator, European Union Delegation to Ethiopia	Donor/international organisation	24/01/2020
D-OI3	Member of the Advisory Council of the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia	Government agency	24/01/2020
D-CD1	Chief Program Officer, Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation	Donor/development cooperation	04/02/2020
OI2	Senior economist, Global Food and Agriculture Practice, World Bank	International organisation	07/02/2020
D-ON1	Country Director, Fundación Promoción Social	Donor/NGO	07/02/2020
ON-CD1	Country Director, ActionAid	NGO/development cooperation	12/02/2020
GE1	Member of the Advisory Council of the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia	Government agency	12/02/2020
GE2	Project Implementation Manager, Agricultural Transformation Agency; Member of the Advisory Council of the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia	Government agency	13/02/2020
ON-CD2	Project implementation expert, Caritas Switzerland	NGO/development cooperation	18/02/2020
ON-CD3	Project advisor, Caritas Switzerland	NGO/development cooperation	18/02/2020
CS1	International consultant, former chief consultant of ActionAid Ethiopia, former chief technical consultant of the Food Security Program	Consultancy/government agency	20/02/2020