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**To cite this article:** Yonas Tesema (2023) Towards Decent Employment or a Destitute Livelihood? The Dynamics of the Agrarian Question of Labor in Ethiopia, Forum for Development Studies, 50:3, 445-469, DOI: [10.1080/08039410.2023.2230213](https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2023.2230213)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2023.2230213>



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Published online: 01 Jul 2023.



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## Towards Decent Employment or a Destitute Livelihood? The Dynamics of the Agrarian Question of Labor in Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>

Yonas Tesema 

*Department of Social Anthropology, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway*

**ABSTRACT** This paper examines the demand for industrial labor among dispossessed peasants and how the non-absorption of peasants' labor into industrial production intertwined in and around the Bole Lemi industrial park (BLIP) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The scores of peasants who were dispossessed to enable the establishment of BLIP were promised to get compensatory jobs. The park's expansion ensures capital accumulation for the companies but produces a 'pile of pain' for the dispossessed peasants. Drawing on fieldwork in Addis Ababa, this article illustrates that the promised transformation of dispossessed peasants' lives from farm to factory and rural to urban lifestyle did not happen. This is due to companies' ignorance of dispossessed peasants' labor because they are illiterate, 'unskilled' and beyond the productive capitalist age as well as companies' preference for employing young women. While rural women migrate to the city for industrial labor, on the contrary, the dispossessed peasants living in Addis Ababa are seasonally 'returning to the farm' as daily laborers in rural areas known for their labor shortages. The peasants become surplus to industrial production due to capitalists'<sup>2</sup> preference for employing young women of 'productive age' (roughly between 15-30). As a result, a new precarious peasant class of 'three nos' – no land, no work, and no hope – is emerging. The aspiration, hope and expectation of modernity – city lifestyle, proletarianization and improvement in livelihoods turned into the reality of under/unemployment and migration.

**KEYWORDS:** labor; peasants; proletarianization; unemployment; Ethiopia

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1 By the question of labor, I mean the dispossessed peasants' desire to labor or the question of getting employment, which should not be confused with labor conditions. This paper is about the peasants who were dispossessed due to the expansion of BLIP and those who want to work but are underemployed or excluded from industrial work.

2 In this article, the term capitalist is used to denote employers of international companies who hired thousands of local workers in BLIP and rich rural farmers who temporarily employed poor daily labouring farmers.

## Introduction

In Ethiopia, there is a structural shift from agricultural-led to industrial-led development to accelerate economic growth and job creation (UNDP, 2018). Ethiopia aims to attract labor-intensive manufacturing industries to create job opportunities for its citizens (Rosen, 2016), as well as to transform the nation's economy from agrarian to industrial, with the aspiration of making Ethiopia Africa's manufacturing hub and lower middle income by 2025 (World Bank, 2019). To realize this lofty goal, the government is pursuing an 'appropriate' industrial policy (Arkebe, 2015) and playing an activist role (Arkebe, 2015; 2018; 2019; Chinigo, 2021; Weis, 2016). Since 2010, Ethiopia has been pursuing a rapid industrialization project under successive development plans such as Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP I & II) to create hundreds of thousands of new jobs in manufacturing industries (UNDP, 2018). Under these development plans, Ethiopia's economy grew at a 9.44% annual rate from 2010/11–2019/20, making it Africa's fastest-growing economy (World Bank, 2019) and a model of 'Africa rising' (Arkebe, 2015).

The GTP II (2015-2020) plan prioritizes the growth of the manufacturing industries to transform the economy and achieve rapid and sustainable development. The Ethiopian government aims to establish industrial parks to create jobs, enhance exports, generate foreign currency and promote knowledge transfer and urban development (Arkebe 2019, Chen, 2021). The expansion of industrial parks and the country's attempt to become a manufacturing hub could imply the country's anticipation of transforming the economy from agriculture to industrial production. However, the anticipated transformation of the economy appears to be falling short due to existing realities that contradict policy promises and aspirations (Yonas, 2022). Ethiopia's labor-intensive manufacturing policy sought to include the local population (particularly the dispossessed) in the development project by creating industrial job opportunities and transforming their livelihoods from agrarian to industrial proletariat. In reality, the capitalist mode of production ignored dispossessed peasants, and proletarianization of the dispossessed is incomplete.

The industrial park development has driven thousands of migrant women from rural villages to cities and towns where industrial parks are located. As a result, the expansion of the industry created jobs for young rural women while pushing dispossessed peasants to the margins or into urban squatters. As of February 2022, BLIP employed 20, 010 workers, 64 of whom are dispossessed peasants who work as greeners and cleaners<sup>3</sup> in the park compound. In what ways has industrialization alienated/excluded peasant labor in Ethiopia? What if industrialization fails to create the expected jobs for dispossessed peasants? How are the dispossessed peasants surviving, and what is the source of the living wage after the dispossession? Based on fieldwork

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3 The men peasants work every day from Monday to Saturday to take care of lawns and seedlings while the women clean the compound of BLIP. Those who take care of lawns and seedlings are called greeners.

in Ethiopia, this article will attempt to answer these pressing questions by examining how peasant dispossession drove them off their means of subsistence into joblessness, impoverished livelihoods and uncertain futures. This article contributes significantly to the growing body of knowledge about how the industrial expansion and transnational capital flow in the global South became disruptive for the dispossessed and how it favored the capitalists, the state and young labor forces.

The article is based on fieldwork research conducted between August 2021-August 2022 in and around BLIP. Located on the outskirts of Addis Ababa and built on 342 hectares of former agricultural fields, BLIP is the first industrial park in Ethiopia. Specifically, it is located in Woreda 11 of the newly designated Lemi Kura sub-city of Addis Ababa in the direction of the southeast. BLIP hosts 11 international companies – mainly from Asia. The findings presented in this paper rely principally on data from the formal and informal interviews with dispossessed peasants, including those who got jobs in BLIP as greeners and cleaners (men and women), as well as mobile labor peasants (those who travel to rural zones for seasonal job), BLIP officials and companies' managers.<sup>4</sup> I interviewed dispossessed peasants in Afan Oromo in their native language, BLIP officials in Amharic, and company managers in Amharic and English. The observation was also carried out at the BLIP workplace to examine what the dispossessed men greeners and women cleaners do and to communicate with them informally.

The remaining part of the article is structured as follows: First, I will briefly present the body of literature this paper speaks to, followed by theoretical framing that orients the paper. Next, I will provide a brief overview of the dispossession process, followed by a section that discusses peasants' source of livelihood after the dispossession. In the fifth and sixth sections, I explored how the companies excluded and ignored the dispossessed peasants' labor and why they favored the young labor forces, as well as the views of the managers of the companies and BLIP officials on the failure of peasants' proletarianization.

### **The political economy of dispossession in Ethiopia**

The literature on dispossession in Ethiopia has emphasized top-down approaches, focusing on global land deals, state power consolidation, and, to a lesser extent, people's resistance. Scholars such as Asebe and Korf (2018), Fana (2016) and Lavers (2016) underscore the role of the state in dispossessing peripheral communities to consolidate its power, while Dessalegn (2014) and Tsegaye (2017) explore the negative effects of the dispossession on the local community. Aside from dominant narratives of dispossession literature on large-scale land investments in lowland/peripheral regions of the country, this paper aims to contribute to the literature in two ways. First, I provide

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<sup>4</sup> The voices of migrant women working in the factories in BLIP are not included in this paper because this article focuses on those who are dispossessed to enable the establishment of BLIP, not those who work in the factories.

new empirical evidence on the dispossession of peasants for the establishment of an industrial park around Addis Ababa in central Ethiopia. Second, I demonstrate the importance of contemplating the livelihoods of the dispossessed peasants after the dispossession. While the livelihood disruption of dispossessed peasants continues, little is said about it in Ethiopia. As Oya and Schaefer (2021) and Mains and Mulat (2021) have indicated, those who get employment in factories in industrial parks face poor working and living conditions. However, these pieces of literature need to establish an analytical link between the dispossessed peasants and the promised industrial labor, to which this paper seeks to contribute.

Land dispossession is deeply ingrained in Ethiopia's political economy and state-building projects across different regimes (Gutu, 2021; Yonas, 2022). The dispossession of land had its roots in imperial regimes and continues to take place nowadays. During Emperor Menelik's II (1889-1913) expansion, local people were dispossessed of their land in new areas that were incorporated into the central government. Similarly, during the reign of Haileselassie (1930-1974), large tracts of land was forcibly taken from the peasants in favor of the regime's loyalists and soldiers (Asebe and Korf, 2018; Gutu 2021; Yonas, 2022). Dispossession practices during the Derg regime (1974-1991) were manifested in the nationalization of lands and coercive resettlement and villagization programs (Gutu, 2021). Since 1991, the state has emerged as the owner, distributor and dispossessor of the land for 'development purposes.' The state land policy<sup>5</sup> enabled the state to dispossess the landholders whenever the government wanted to. This is due to the incumbent constitution that gives the state the right to own the land collectively with the people. Article 40(3) of the 1995 constitution asserts that the right to own 'rural and urban land, as well as of all natural resources, is exclusively vested in the State and in the peoples of Ethiopia.' In practice, the people have the right to use the land, not to own it. The land policy favors the state and the investors at the expense of the peasants (see also Dessalegn, 2014). Suffice it to say that dispossession is a political economy process that is deeply entrenched in the state's land policy.

In general, based on the aims and ambitions of the dispossession across different regimes in Ethiopia, we can divide the 'regime of dispossession' (Levien, 2018) into three – *imperialist*, *socialist* and *developmentalist*. All types of regimes of dispossession have two characteristics in common: power consolidation and high-modernist aspirations to 'improve' people's lives in peripheral regions of the country (see also Asebe and Korf, 2018). The developmentalist regime of dispossession emerged in the early 2000s, inspired by the developmental state model of East Asian countries. Large tracts of land were taken from the landholders by this regime of dispossession for 'development purposes' both in peripheral and urban areas. What made the developmentalist regime different from its

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<sup>5</sup> Yonas has thoroughly discussed how state land policy forced peasants into a poor lifestyle (see Yonas, 2022)

predecessors was the need for land for industrial production and urban expansion around major towns. Thus, recent land dispossession in Ethiopia has primarily been driven by the developmental state's interest in promoting export-oriented investments rather than global factors (Dessalegn, 2014; Tsegaye, 2017). Given the country's depletion of foreign currency and the growing number of unemployed youths, the government emphasized building industrial parks and luring labor-intensive foreign manufacturing companies. The expansion of industrial parks created industrial jobs for young women, but it impoverished the dispossessed peasants, which put the state-led development approach in limbo (cf. Dessalegn, 2014).

### **Linking dispossession and labor: a theoretical background**

According to the classic Marxian approach, the dispossession of peasants from their means of production served the capitalists for two reasons: 1) as a precondition for the accumulation of capital, and 2) to create 'free labourers' who were left with only their labor power and were willing to sell it to the capitalist in order to survive. They are freed from their source of income in order for capitalists to amass more capital. This 'class of free labourers' (Akram-Lodhi, 2021; Parry, 2020) has no choice but to accept what the capitalists offer in the form of wage employment (Marx, [1867] 1976, p. 895). If we consider labor power to be a commodity ready to be sold in the market (Yonas, 2022), as anthropologist Li (2013) bluntly asks, what if there is no market for dispossessed peasants to sell their labor power? What if peasants' labor is surplus to capital's interest? This takes us back to Marx's concept of 'relative surplus population.' Marx's interpretation of relative surplus population is the intentional formation of an 'industrial reserve army' for capital expansion and reproduction (Marx, [1867] 1976, p. 784-5). According to Marx, surplus population is 'the lever of capitalist accumulation [and that] it becomes a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production' (Marx, [1867] 1976, p. 785).

The Marxian labor reserve army approach does not apply to modern capitalist formation. Surplus population or labor, to which I refer, is not, on the other hand, what Marx stated. Unlike Marx's theoretical position and the early capitalist transition, which created an industrial proletariat, the contemporary form of agrarian transition and peasant dispossessions do not create job opportunities. Instead, it created surplus labor that the capitalists no longer require (see Breman, 2019; Carbonella and Kasmir, 2014; Li, 2017). The peasants who were dispossessed from their means of production around BLIP are not proletarianized in factory. They are unemployed and unnecessary in the capitalist mode of production. When the peasants were dispossessed from their land, they had no choice but to sell their labor power in order to survive. The issue is the lack of an employer/labor market where they can sell their labor power. Harvey (2014, p. 63) argues that

laborers are 'free' to sell their 'labor power to whomsoever they like,' but this is a tricky argument because, at least in Ethiopia, dispossessed peasants' labor is excluded from industrial jobs and dismissed by capitalists as 'unfit.' Peasants will not travel long distances for precarious daily labor in rural villages if selling labor power to whomever is true (as will be shown in this article). As a result, selling labor power is not to any employer; it is only to employers who recognize and value that labor power.

The nascent development of capitalism in Ethiopia has created a class of landless job-seeking peasants dispersed across urban and rural areas, either permanently or temporarily. The dispossession of peasants freed them of jobs rather than for industrial wage labor. The dispossessed peasants are excluded from industrial labor not because they are reserved, but because they are simply surplus to industrial production as 'capital demands more youthful workers, fewer adults' (Marx, [1867] 1976, p. 795). Companies disregard peasants' labor due to capital requirements such as literacy, docility and the productive capitalist age. Foreign factory owners, who employ thousands of locals, prefer young and resilient women. Thus, peasant dispossession for industrialization does not precede industrial work and inclusive industrial development (Breman, 2013; 2016; Gardner, 2018; Li, 2017). The dispossessed community's livelihoods continue to deteriorate in the absence of absorption into wage labor. 'There is no employment, no connection to the [industry], and no inclusion,' (Gardner, 2018, p. 1492). As a result of modern capitalism's inability to provide employment for the vast majority of dispossessed peasants, the 'agrarian question of labour' is unavoidable (Zhan and Scully, 2018, p. 1028; Bernstein, 2004; 2006). The agrarian labor question refers to the question for employment in manufacturing industries, as well as the issue of livelihood stability and economic security (Bernstein, 2009, p. 252). Most importantly, the agrarian question in today's world is about a better standard of living compared to prior dispossession living status (Araghi, 2009; Watts, 2009).

### **Process and promise**

Due to the transition from 'agricultural to industrial social relations, the peasantry is dispossessed of its means of subsistence and pushed towards urban centers' (Neilson and Stubbs, 2011, p. 437). The dispossession around BLIP occurred in the rainy months of July and August 2011/12. The process began a year before the happening of the actual dispossession. The peasants were given meager compensation and urban land on which to relocate. Some of the peasants had finished the compensation money by the time of the dispossession, while others were able to build a house in the new location in the city corner of Addis Ababa. After one year, i.e. after crops were sown, the peasants were abruptly told to leave. One of the peasants described the situation thus:

We were forcedly dispossessed. If you resist, they send you to prison. They dispossessed us during the time when our crops were ripening in the months of July and August. They demolished our houses and bulldozed our crops during the rainy season. We did not build a house in the new place at the time. Then, we were forced to move to relatives' homes.

When peasants attempted to resist dispossession, they were labeled '*limat achenagafi*' (development resister) and threatened with imprisonment. According to one of my interlocutors, the officials told them that 'the government can demolish the multi-story building if it is required for the development purpose. Whether you like it or not, you must leave the area. The land belongs to the government.' Then the peasants left the area because they could not say no to the government, and they were unable to exercise their agency.

The government compensated peasants with 18 and 6 Ethiopian birr<sup>6</sup> per square meter of farmland and pastureland, respectively. The compensation process had flaws because the productivity of the land was not considered: the size of the land as well as its productivity potential were not taken into account. Having a large amount of land and having a small amount of productive land are not the same thing. Fertile land with a small area can produce more than infertile land with a large area. Those who harvested large quintals of grain received nearly equal compensation to those who harvested a small number of quintals because the payment was based on the size of the land rather than its productivity. The productivity potential of the land is more important than its size. The officials attempted to measure the productivity of the land at some point.<sup>7</sup> They selected a wheat farm in a small area, harvested it, and calculated the quintals of grain that the peasants would harvest from the remaining farmland. This approach was also problematic for the following reasons: 1) the wheat farm's limited size cannot always provide the same result across different sizes. That is, good wheat productivity may exist in one area but not in another within the same hectare. 2) Wheat production varies year to year based on rainfall, input, and services provided.

Peasants were also given urban lands on which to build their homes at the same time. The government allocated land compensation based on the size of the family. Those who were married with up to two children were given 105 square meters of land to live on. Those with up to five children received 375 square meters. They were given 500 square meters of land if they had 5–8 children. The intention behind the family size and land size is for the children to be able to build their own

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6 1 USD was equal to 52.57 Ethiopian birr as of 27/09/2022.

7 342 hectares of land were taken by the government in two phases, known as Bole Lemi I and II. Measuring productivity was started in the second phase of the dispossession. The first phase of BLIP covers an area of 156 hectares, while the second phase includes 186 hectares of land.



house out of the total land size given to the family. This intention was problematic for two reasons: it did not take into account the family's future size or wealth status. Those peasants who received 375 square meters or more of land sold half or more of it and built on the rest with the proceeds. Those who received the smallest lot size (105 square meters) and were unable to build a house sold the land to cover their expenses, eventually renting rooms and migrating to nearby small towns. That was the only option available to them at the time. This decision had clouded their sons' and daughters' futures. Even though the government considered increasing the size of land based on family size, poor peasants used their last option to have a house, leaving their children homeless. After a few years, those children have grown into youths and require their own space.

Not all dispossessed people received housing land. For example, the government denied young people land in the new location. 'In order to get plots of land to build a house here in Addis Sefer<sup>8</sup>, you need to get married first,' the officials told the young people, to which the youths replied, 'will we make her [wife] eat that land – the land you will offer us if we get married? We don't have any land to plough and no other source of income, so why do we marry?' State officials insisted that getting married is mandatory to obtain land for housing. As a result, scores of males and females married while still in high school in order to get land. Those who married in order to obtain land are suffering today. They were too young to be married. Some of them later divorced because they couldn't live together or feed their children due to the poverty they faced in their new location. Those who did not marry were not given land to live on. 'I was twenty at the time'. They pushed me to marry, but I refused. They did not grant me land. 'I am 30 now, but I am still dependent on my family,' said one informant. On the other hand, getting married was also not a guarantee to getting land where to build a house at the city corner. Traditionally, a father gives land to his son when his son gets married. The son then starts to plough his fatherland without paying taxes on that land. This means the government knows that the land is owned by the father and that the land tax is paid by the same person as before as the land is the same size as before, and a son does not pay a separate tax. But, when the state officials assigned urban land, they refused to grant land to married sons who used to plough their father's land, citing they were not paying taxes to the government.

Before the dispossession, the government promised that the industry would bring decent employment, transferrable skills, and investment. The government assured the dispossessed that they would be given priority in finding work in the industrial park and that their rural lives would improve. One of my research participants strongly opposes the discrepancy between the promise and the reality, reminding us of what they were told:

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<sup>8</sup> Addis Sefer is a new location at the corner of the city where the dispossessed peasants were given land to settle.

They [state officials] told us that we would get better jobs in the factory. They told us that priority would be given to the dispossessed family and their children. When companies started operation, they asked us about our level of education. Companies did not employ us because we didn't pursue formal education. So, where is the priority that was promised from the start? Didn't the government know that the companies required educated workers when they deceived us? They played with our lives and with the future of our children.

The promises made by government officials did not match the expectations of the dispossessed peasants. Peasants claim that there are no factory jobs available to them, and that girls from rural villages take the jobs at the expense of their land and children. This is supported by the informant's word of mouth, which reads,

In the beginning, they promised us that we get jobs and a better income and that our children get jobs in the BLIP. None of the promises materialized. They employed girls from other places, not our children. Our children, those who are university and college graduates, do not get a job here. There are a lot of professional office jobs in the park, but our children are not there. We gave our land, but we didn't get rewards for it. We feel that the government betrayed us. Companies and workers from other areas are enjoying the opportunity. We feel alien on our own land.

In contrast to the peasants' claims, I observed that the youth population from the dispossessed family do not want tiresome factory work. They demand office work that is competitive and requires working experience.

### **Post-dispossession sources of peasants' living wage**

Agriculture was the main source of livelihood before the advent of the industrial park. Wheat, chickpea, lentils, and teff from grain types, as well as various vegetables, were the major agricultural reaps. Cows, goats, sheep, and poultry were also common. The amount produced in quintals varies from crop to crop and year to year, depending on fertilization and the effects of climate change. Previously, peasants claimed that they used to produce surplus crops to support their basic needs and also had extra products that they could store for future use or sell. Even if a person is poor at the time, he or she can work for a wealthy farmer and receive either money or grain. They work as sharecroppers (*qixxee*) for a peasant who owns a large farm. They also work as day laborers for the wealthy farmers, weeding and harvesting. But now, as one of the interlocutors put it, everyone is equally poor, and there is no one to work for:

I did not have enough plots of land to grow crops. I was poor. The difference is I do not worry about what to eat then. I used to work on the estate of rich farmers either for wage employment or for sharecropping. After dispossession, I am poorer than I was because no rich farmer, no wage labor, no sharecropping. This development project has impoverished us all.

The dispossession has created two types of peasants striving to feed their families: 1) Semi-peasants and 2) semi-proletariat peasants. Semi-peasants: some peasants continue to have access to plots of land leftover from the industrial expansion. Because they are neither completely dispossessed nor full-time agrarians, they are classified as semi-peasants. They are not fully peasants because they do not have full access to farmland. Despite living in the city, this group of peasants owns a small plot of agricultural land. They keep livestock in the city and herd them on their leftover plots of land. Jacobs (2018) refers to such a way of life as ‘urban proletariat with peasant characteristics.’ I would argue that semi-peasants with semi-urban characteristics are more accurate. They have no other source of income in the city. They are not employed in industry. They live in the city but are practically still peasants under limited access to land. They struggle with double problems – lack of full access to the farmland and unemployment in the city. Tolossa’s story illustrates this well:

I am 53 years old. I inherited farming practice and animal husbandry from my father. I did not attend school. Previously, I had 20 cows, 15 goats and sheep. I had huge tracts of pastureland. When this development project came, they [state officials] forced us to leave the area and to sell my economic base – livestock because there was not enough space to keep them in the city. I sold half of them, and I decided to retain some because my life is connected to them. Now, I am herding my cattle on leftover plots of land, and sometimes I lease grazing land from rural farmers. I sell goats or sheep to cover my family’s consumption.

Semi-proletariat peasants are peasants who sell their labor power to the industrial park and work on agricultural farms for the wealthy in rural areas. Bernstein (2009, p. 250) coined the term ‘classes of labour’ to refer to the semi-proletariat and proletariat, who rely on the sale of their labor power for daily reproduction. Bernstein (2010, p. 128) defines semi-proletarianization as those who are *not* completely dispossessed of their means of production. However, I used the term semi-proletariat to refer to people who are *completely* dispossessed but only work part-time or are underemployed. They are semi-proletariat because, due to a lack of relevant jobs that match their skills, they do not entirely sell their labor power as they wish. They are low-income peasants with precarious day-to-day labor jobs. This includes both men and women who work in BLIP as greeners and cleaners. Out of 1,450 dispossessed people, this low-wage job was obtained by 4% of the dispossessed peasants. They are organized into two men and women separate groups. The men water the lawn and seedlings while the women clean the compound of BLIP. All groups of peasants strive to ensure food security and adapt to the skyrocketing cost of living in Addis Ababa. One of them told me about the insignificance of the wage:

Our life has changed from working for ourselves to becoming daily wage laborers. We become the daily laborers and gate guards on our own land. The government

formed an association for us and made us daily laborers. What we earn from this industrial park does not bring any change to our lives. We earn 2000 birr monthly, but it is nothing. It cannot cover the cost of food for our family. The money we earn from daily labor never changes but the cost of life increases daily. The wage is the same every year. Those who pay us don't understand the situations of life.



Picture by the author: A group of women dispossessed peasants clean in BLIP.

Until Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018, no dispossessed peasant had a job in BLIP. People blame the former Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF)-led government for dispossession and a lack of industrial jobs. The cleaners and greeners have only been on the job for two years. Even if they claim that they do not deserve the jobs they have now, they praise the incumbent government for the benefits they receive. During the previous administration, the cleaning was done at the expense of the dispossessed by a government-affiliated cleaning company. The company was expelled by the current government and given to the female cleaners. That is why, as one person explained, they compare previous and incumbent governments:

The TPLF dispossessed us, and they didn't ask us what kind of challenges we were facing. It has been two years since we formed this association and started to get some money. Comparatively, with the TPLF regime, this government is better. Today, we are free to speak our grievances in front of all levels of government. But still, we are unable to cover our monthly consumption.

I observed that the men's labor group adjusts spaces for seedlings and that they manually dig lands in addition to watering and taking care of lawns. Speaking furiously, one

of the peasants explained the difficulty of the job:



Picture by the author: A group of dispossessed men peasants working in BLIP.

Since we came here, we are always angry, with no happiness at all. We are dying. Look at what we do [pointing at a pile of soil, as you can see from the picture]. We do what the dozer should do. We dig soil; we do this to survive, to buy grain. We become dogsbody and slaves on our own land.

The agrarian transition is not bringing the expected decent jobs and better life in areas where the state forcibly dispossessed peasants. They are sobbing over their loss and the difficulties they are experiencing at their new relocation site. The transition appears to be ‘successful’ in areas where the government provided farmers with the necessary agricultural inputs. These farmers can produce more and gradually and willingly migrate to the city in search of a better life. One example was given by a dispossessed peasants near BLIP: ‘The farmers from Bale and Arsi were able to produce a lot for themselves and change their lives. They built houses in the city and moved there voluntarily.’ However, when the government dispossesses them without providing adequate alternatives, they are left reminiscing about their former livelihoods. They have settled in the city but are mentally diving into the idea of oceans outside of the city. Overall, the dispossessed peasants did not get the expected job opportunities, leaving them with limited livelihood options and avenues of survival. Poverty and pauperization became the fate of those who were dispossessed and unable to be absorbed into factory production (Bremen, 2016; Murthy, 2017; Shah and Lerche, 2018). One of the peasants expressed the bewilderment of life they are in and how the development project impoverished them:

Our life is changed upside down since the dispossession. We do not know who we are, after all. We are not traders who trade in the city to support our lives. We are not farmers

anymore as we lost our property. The government dispossessed us for development purposes. We do not oppose development, but we need our own development. Whose development when we remain poorer? Whose development when our lives changed from self-sufficiency to insufficiency?

According to a household survey study conducted by BLIP, the majority of the dispossessed peasants claim the worst life changes happened to them after the dispossession:

Changes	Men	Women	Total	Percent
For better	17	8	25	9.72%
Worse	181	51	232	90.27%
Total	198	59	257	100%

Source: author's calculation based on Yechalework (2019)

Peasants who were producing for themselves and were relatively self-reliant have now become job seekers and labor migrants across rural and urban spaces. In what follows, I will present two types of peasants' migration to secure their living wages: return to the farm and escaping the new poverty.

### **The return to the farm**

The agrarian ethos of 'returning to the land' or 'back-to-the-land movement' had emerged in the late nineteenth century (Bowdler, 2021). The assumption was peasants' preference for life in the countryside as better, natural, and virtuous compared to life in the city and urban industrialization. In Ethiopia, the peasants are not returning to the land; they are returning to the farm. Even if some demand to return to the land, they do not have land to settle in a rural village. Rather, they seasonally leave the city where they were relocated and travel to the rural area to work on the farm for the rich farmers, i.e. what I call *the return to the farm*. According to Li (2007, p. 19), people who lack access to the means of production are forced to accept the low wages of capitalists as wage laborers. But what if there is no wage labor that is relevant to the skills and experiences of those denied access? For example, dispossessed peasants are skilled laborers, but their skills are no longer required for factory work. They have agricultural production skills but not industrial production. As a result, they are compelled to travel between rural and urban areas in search of wage labor that fits their experience and skills.

Historically, separating peasants from their means of production forced them to migrate from rural to urban centers in search of jobs (Breman, 2019; D'Costa, 2019). Peasants in Addis Ababa, on the other hand, are migrating to rural areas in search of fitting agricultural jobs. According to anthropologist James Ferguson (1999, p. 77), cities 'produce potential workers in abundance, and urban jobs are today more regularly filled by city-born youths than aspiring migrants from the



countryside.’ Ferguson did not specify the types of jobs held by city-born youths and rural-born but city dwellers such as the relocated peasants. If he intended to include any type of urban jobs, he may have taken it for granted, because factory work is primarily filled by rural-born young women, leading the dispossessed peasants to look for work outside of the city. The preference of capitalists for hiring young and relatively educated women, combined with the government’s failure to create job opportunities for dispossessed peasants, forced them to look for relevant available agricultural jobs elsewhere in the countryside. The expansion of BLIP deprived peasants of their means of production, forcing them to become free-floating job-seeking peasants across urban and rural spaces.

The peasants ‘own no productive assets themselves and are unable to sell their labour power’ (Bremen, 2019, p. 38) in the city’s labor market due to both the absence of relevant agricultural jobs and lack of formal education. Thus, they were left without any means of production and were forced to seek alternative suitable jobs back in rural areas. They are job and wage hunters and gatherers (Bremen, 1994; Cross, 2010). These peasant labor migrants have no economic base in the city other than their home and family. During the sowing and harvesting seasons, the peasants leave their homes and family to travel to mainly the Eastern Shewa and Arsi zones of Oromia Regional State in search of jobs. Once they get the job, they establish a connection/network of work for future seasons. Both peasant labor migrants and rural employers help each other by attracting more labor migrants to needy rural employers and connecting migrants with another rural employer if the migrants perform well and complete tasks as agreed. The capitalist system, which favors the wealthy, who pay higher taxes, while simultaneously pushing peasants into abject poverty as a form of structure, has shaped peasants’ agency to seek out available livelihood options that better fit their experiences. Their labor is ignored by the companies (foreign capitalists) but accepted by the local capitalist farmers.<sup>9</sup>

There are two ways to pay for labor: on a daily or contractual basis. Returnees to the farm may labor and be paid together if they travel to a specific location in a group and agree to sign a contractual agreement with the capitalist farmer. If they sign a contract, they will spend the entire day working in the field in order to finish early and sign other contracts with other employers. They are expected to work for eight hours per day if the agreement is on a daily basis. As a result, they prefer a contractual agreement in order to work overtime and earn more money. Since they are temporary agricultural workers, they do not have to worry about what to eat or where to cook or where to stay. The rural employer provides them accommodation and food for a short period of sowing and harvesting seasons. During the sowing (April to June) and harvesting

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<sup>9</sup> Capitalist farmers are those who own large estates of farmland and who use extra labor to sow or harvest. It includes so-called "model farmers" as well as other agricultural investors. However, I didn’t meet any of those employers. See (Hailemichael and Haug, 2020; Lefort, 2012) for more information on model farmers.

(November to December) seasons, these returnees to the farm are usually away from their city homes. They send money back home through nearby financial institutions. They send almost all of their earnings to their left-behind dependents because they do not spend much on them as they get free accommodation and food. Wives stay at home and care for children while their husbands are away for a few months.

The country's agrarian transition is not resulting in the proletarianization of dispossessed peasants, and that is why the peasants are returning to the farm as hired laborers in rural zones known for their agricultural productivity. Breman (2019, p. 26), in an Indian context, rejects the notion that labor mobility occurs due to labor abundance at the point of origin and a labor shortage at the work destination. This, he claims, is due to a lack of adequate pay in the villages of origin, and people migrate in search of better pay. Against this backdrop, I argue that in the Ethiopian context, peasant labor mobility to rural areas or returning to the farm occurs not as a result of a lack of adequate pay at the origin, but rather as a result of a lack of employment at all. There are no jobs available in the city that match their skills and experience. Peasants have no formal education and only know how to farm. Furthermore, they migrate to rural areas in search of work seasonally because these areas are famous for their abundant agricultural productivity, and capitalist farmers face labor shortages primarily during the sowing and harvest seasons. As a result, Breman's rejection of a labor shortage at a destination that may be a cause of the influx of migrants has also been mistaken. According to Breman (2019, p. 31), employers prefer to hire circular migrants because they are less expensive than local laborers. Ironically, I came across that getting temporary agricultural jobs stemmed from employers' need for more workers rather than the low pay. As one of the returnees from the farm confirmed to me: 'they pay us as equal as local workers. Even they tip us sometimes'. Breman's argument is contradictory by itself. What is the gain if labor migrants move to another location due to low pay at the origin and are paid less at the destination?

### **Escaping the 'new' poverty?**

I will present three brief cases of dispossessed peasants who chose migration as a survival strategy to escape the 'new' poverty they faced in their new location.

#### **Gemechu**

Gemechu was living with his family in his native village, a place where an industrial park is situated. He had two children, arable land and livestock. Before the dispossession, he did not worry about feeding his family and covering monthly expenses. His wife used to sell butter and the milk of their ten cows, *quunnaas*<sup>10</sup> of grain, and

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10 A bowl made of wood or woven straw is used for measuring grain. Approximately one *quunnaa* measures ten kilograms of grain.



vegetables to the nearby market to cover all of their costs. Gemechu was given 105 square meters of land in the corner of the city in order to build a house for his family. However, by the time of dispossession, he did not have enough money to build a house. If it was larger, he would have sold half and built on the rest, as some of his friends have done. He decided to sell the land and relocate to a more affordable area where he would not be able to see the industrial park that had robbed him of his land and childhood memories. Then he relocated to Gelan, where he built a small house with the proceeds from the sale of 105 square meters of land. I talked to him on the phone, and he confirmed to me that he lives in a new community, with a new neighbor and in a new town. He regretfully informed me that his land, former neighbors, and social relationships are only a memory, and that his family is not included in the development project:

Let alone friends and former neighbors; I cannot see my brother in months. I feel loneliness and exclusion. I am forced to be excluded from our familial ties because I cannot afford to live in Addis Ababa. I am excluded from the development that left me empty-handed, the development that forced me to migrate to a small town, the development that our government chants loudly.

Two interesting points emerge from Gemechu's account. The first is the embeddedness of the family bond in society. Male siblings have traditionally lived in close proximity to their father's home in rural areas. They share and exchange various sorts. For example, they used to help each other through difficult times and problems. They work together to plough, husk, and harvest. Second, family ties are being severed, and social disruption is unavoidable as a result of the fragile agrarian transition that has failed to accommodate the dispossessed.

### **Gadisa's wife and Hirpha's daughter**

Gadisa was one of those schoolboys who quit school to get married in order to, in turn, get urban land for housing. By then, he was 17 years old and an 11th grade student. To get house land, he quit school and got married. With the support of his father, he built L-shaped two rooms of the house on the taken urban land. Suddenly, his wife conceived a baby, and they started to regret their decision to get married because they both quit school and they do not have a source of a living wage. The third person joined them – their baby boy. They could not manage their livelihood, and the marriage was finally concluded by divorcing. His wife migrated to Lebanon as a housemaid, leaving a baby boy behind with Gadisa.

Similarly, Hirpha has four children, and Sinobse is the firstborn. Prior to the dispossession, Hirpha's family does not worry about house consumption as they earn surplus production. After relocation to the new place, they were forced to see their daughter off to Saudi Arabia to help the family. Having tears streaming down his cheeks, Hirpha told me how they decided to let his daughter migrate to Saudi:

Words cannot express how much pain I have felt since we moved here [relocation site in the city]. Life here is very challenging. We are unable to feed our children three times a day. If we eat lunch, sometimes we skip dinner. Then, we are forced to send our eldest daughter to work as a housemaid in Saudi Arabia. She sacrificed a lot for us. Had it not been for that miserable dispossession and the rising cost of living in a new location, we would not have sent our daughter to that country.

According to the accounts above, capitalist development drove people ‘off the land into jobless and uncertain futures’ (Li, 2017, p. 4). It pushed the dispossessed to the margins, forcing them to migrate domestically or internationally.

### **Surplussing and alienating agrarian labor**

Thousands of job opportunities for young migrants from rural areas have undoubtedly been created by factories in BLIP. Simultaneously, the factories excluded dispossessed peasants from industrial production and alienated their labor. The peasants cite two reasons for the companies’ lack of job opportunities: 1) the companies do not need to employ local dispossessed peasants because they are illiterate, ‘unskilled,’ and not in the productive age – labor alienation. Their land is valuable, but their labor is alienated (see also Li, 2011). 2) Peasants complain that migrant rural women are taking the promised factory jobs. However, the dispossessed peasants are not hostile to migrant factory workers; instead, they blame the government for failing to keep its promise of job creation and the companies that ignored their labor.

Many rural labor migrants migrated to the cities having different reasons for choosing industrial work. These first generation of labor migrants are predominantly young women. They are young workers who can work 8-10hrs a day in the factory and are obliged to work overtime if necessary. Employers choose these young labor migrants in BLIP to work on the shopfloor than the dispossessed peasants who are illiterate and no longer young to work. For instance, at Blue Apparel Company (fictitious name), a minimum of 5th grade in school and a *kebele* ID that shows the person’s age is between 15–30 are needed to get employment. As one of the dispossessed peasants puts it,

Companies require what they call productive laborers. They employ only the young population. I turned 40 last month. How could I work standing or sitting for more than ten hours a day at this age? For them, I am too old to be a productive laborer.

For the dispossessed community whose lives are dependent on their land and labor, ‘growth is the promissory note that justifies present harms’ (Li, 2013, p. 1). The industrial expansion offered the peasants neither employment nor viable livelihood alternatives, which I refer to as ‘exclusionary development’ that corresponds to Li’s (2013) ‘jobless growth’ and Gardner’s (2012; 2018) ‘disconnected development.’ Peasants’ land is required to secure growth, but the capitalists neglected their labor and disconnected the industrial production from the peasants (cf. Ferguson, 2005).

The exclusion of peasants from the industrial job and the failure of the state to provide alternative employment to those who are dispossessed has inevitably created a class of three nos – no land, no job and no hope<sup>11</sup> – and hence inequality and low standard of living (see Yonas, 2021). Income inequality and living standard disparities are widening between the dispossessed and the rich. This kind of inequality is manifested both economically and psychologically. The rich bought plots of land given to the relocated peasants and built up to a three-story modern house, while the peasant seller lives in the deteriorated house and wears tattered clothes. This state of affairs is captured by the quote from one of my informants:

The [capitalist] system favors the government, companies, and rich people. The government forced us to leave our land; the companies are making a profit there. The rich person bought our allotted house land and built such a house! [Pointing his finger to a three-story building]. Only God is in favor of the poor.

While the children from three story-building commute to expensive private schools by expensive vehicles, neighbor peasants' children wait for government-sponsored school uniforms, stationeries, and school feeding. What one of the peasants said catches it all: 'we are surviving because the government covers stationery for school children these days. Unless we cannot provide them breakfast and lunch. They would have worn tattered and ragged uniforms'. The nascent industrialization in the country resulted in social inequality.<sup>12</sup> As Abbink (2017, p. 115) rightly puts it, social inequality is increasing in the country:

with a top layer of elite-related businesspeople, officials, cadres, and civil servants safe in their jobs and income, and the large mass of peasants and workers in vulnerable, dependent conditions, struggling to make ends meet and retain their dignity.

### **On the failure of peasant proletarianization: what do officials and the managers think?**

The emerging capitalist development in Ethiopia alienates dispossessed peasants' labor, and proletarianization is incomplete. As Neilson and Stubbs (2011, p. 439) point out, the peasants' 'proletarianization – central to the process of capitalist industrialization – was stalled as large sections of the rural population subsisted outside of capital's reach.' The underlying problem of capitalist industrial production in the country is its inability to accommodate the dispossessed peasants into the production as wage laborers. Those who do not have literacy level of education and who are not

11 Following Walker's (2008, p. 476) class of three nothings – 'no land, no work, no social security', I claim the emergence of a class of three nos due to the non-absorption of the peasants into the industrial production in Ethiopia.

12 See Kasmir and Carbonella (2008) who have contributed compelling work on the effects of dispossession in widening social inequality.

young do not have jobs in the factory. To produce and profit more, capitalists value skill, literacy and a young productive age. What matters to the capitalist is the profit-making and production performance of local workers who can adapt to the work ethic and discipline of the company. Survival is critical for the dispossessed. This is the point at which the interests of various stakeholders collide. Despite the fact that Ethiopia's industrialization policy prioritizes labor-intensive manufacturing firms, there is no room for 'unskilled' and uneducated dispossessed peasants.

For the failure of peasants' proletarianization, the company managers blame the government while the incumbent government officials blame former government officials. Companies' managers claim that the major reasons for bringing their factories to Ethiopia are in search of cheap labor and to take tax advantages of AGOA (African Growth and Opportunity Act) and EBA (Everything but Arms).<sup>13</sup> They gave the task of creating job opportunities to the government. One of the managers said,

We have rented the factory shed from the government. We came to the government-owned industrial park. We don't know how the park was built and how the local community was dispossessed. The local community's issue is none of our business. Dealing with the locals is the duty of the state, not the factories.

When asked why they preferred employing the rural women at the expense of the dispossessed peasants, the managers claimed that they had no problems employing the needy workers regardless of their origin. As one of the managers said, companies prefer employing young women irrespective of their origin because 'they are more resilient than men in performing monotonous garment work.' In fact, companies in BLIP do not necessarily prefer migrant workers over the local labor force, but they prefer young and productive workforces of which rural women outweigh the workforce composition. It appears that the young migrant rural women take on more tedious factory work than those who dwell in the city. One of the young women from the dispossessed families told me that she was not interested in working in the factory: 'I don't want to work standing for over 10hrs a day in a factory. That is a challenging task, and I would like to work in an office if possible. If not, I want the government to organize us in enterprise and work for ourselves.' Low-paying and exhausting factory work did not appeal to these young people, who weighed the risk of losing land against the available jobs. They believe they have the advantage of gaining decent employment in BLIP because their parents were evicted from their land.

On the other hand, I asked the BLIP administration why factories do not employ the needy dispossessed peasants. The BLIP administration does not have the authority

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13 AGOA is a trade agreement between Sub-Saharan African Countries and the USA. According to the agreement, the US granted duty-free and quota-free market access to the African countries. It is believed that foreign companies relocated their manufacturing industries in Ethiopia in order to use duty-free access to the USA market as well as to Europe through the EBA agreement.

to direct company managers to prioritize employing the dispossessed peasants. The state officials at BLIP are also concerned that the dispossessed peasants are left out of the capital's reach while they point their fingers at the former government officials for the failure of peasant proletarianization. They believe that the dispossessed peasants should have been given the training to make them fit with the industrial production from the very beginning. One of the officials told me:

I have to be honest with you. If the project was initially designed to create job opportunities for the local dispossessed community, there was a possibility of training and empowering them parallelly while the construction of the park was ongoing. Nothing was done than political rhetoric like jobs creation and the life-changing project used by officials from the former government to convince the peasants to leave the land. In practice, the promise was not fulfilled. Even if some get employed in the park, the salary could not even be one-tenth of what they used to get as peasants.

What should be done if the development program fails to provide the dispossessed peasants with the promised and anticipated development results? Unlike Tatek (2020, 597), who tries to romanticize the effects of dispossession as 'an assault on rural culture, livelihoods, and way of life,' I argue that it is still not too late to balance between dispossession, employment and development (see also Yonas, 2022). I agree with Li (2009, p. 78) that 'for most of the people who have been dispossessed, and have no access to a living wage, a different kind of solution is needed'. There must be a new system of social protection and regulation to secure work and occupation to the growing precariat (Standing, 2014, p. 963). The dispossessed peasants realized that getting a job was their only option: 'it appears that regaining our land is impossible. Now we need a job, whatever kind of job it is,' one informant said. The peasants possess valuable skills, though their skills are no longer needed for factory work. Their skills are more suited for agricultural production rather than industrial production. As a result, the government should take the lead in forming partnerships between companies and dispossessed peasants. Linking agriculture and industry, for example, will be a way out for dispossessed peasants. The second alternative for benefiting peasants is to make them shareholders in the investment, which could be based on the size of the land and productivity lost due to dispossession. This will foster a sense of belonging and reduce the scale of peasant marginalization.

## **Conclusion**

Ethiopia's industrial policy promises to improve peasants' livelihoods from subsistence to decent employment and from rural to urban lifestyle, but this is unlikely to happen due to the government's inability to create job opportunities for the dispossessed people and companies' alienation of peasants' labor as unskilled and unfit. Although the industrial expansion is intended to be a stepping stone to a better life – from agrarian to industrial and urban lifestyle – for most dispossessed peasants,

the expectation of progress becomes a broken promise. Behind the employment of young rural women in the factories in BLIP, the park's establishment left the dispossessed peasants in a state of precarity and an uncertain future. The peasants were separated from their former means of subsistence and were delinked from factory work. Their land developed from field to factory, from village to industrial cluster, while their life dwindled from relative self-sufficiency to daily job seeking. The capitalist mode of production pushed the peasants out of the agricultural way of production without accommodating them into the industrial proletariat. Instead, it lets them search for relevant jobs in rural and urban areas. For the dispossessed, industrialization turned out to be a mere myth. Misery and destitution become peasants' everyday company (cf. Shrestha, 2008). Those few individuals who get employed in the park as cleaners and greeners are doomed to stay with insignificant wages compared to what they used to earn. Peasants' hope and promise of transition from an agrarian to an industrial way of life seems stalled. The expectation of modernity (Ferguson, 1999) – urban life, waged labor, and livelihood improvement – turned into the reality of unemployment and labor migration. In Wacquant's (2009) term, the poor are being punished.

In fact, creating job opportunities for uneducated dispossessed peasants in a country of millions of educated unemployed is not an easy task. Around 50% of university graduates in Ethiopia are believed to be unemployed (Tatek, 2020). But the priority should better be given to those who sacrificed their livelihoods for development purposes. The government's new *Ten Years of Development Plan: A Pathway to Prosperity* (2021-2030) confessed the lack of creating job opportunities and the rise in unemployment in the past decade as the major challenge (PDC, 2021). The new plan focuses on creating job opportunities for skilled laborers both domestically and internationally. Yet, the fate of uneducated dispossessed peasants is not addressed in the plan.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my gratitude to my PhD supervisors, Harald Aspen and Carla Dahl-Jørgensen, for providing constructive feedback and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. The manuscript was presented at the 17th European Association of Social Anthropologists conference, which took place at Queen's University Belfast in the United Kingdom from July 26 to July 29, 2022, and at the 2nd African Graduate Students' Conference, which took place at Bahir Dar University in Ethiopia on April 27-28, 2022. I am grateful to everyone who attended both conferences.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **Notes on contributor**

*Yonas Tesema* is a PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway. Yonas's research interests include

dispossession, industrial labor and political economy of development. His recent articles were published in *Progress in Development Studies* (2020) and *Forum for Development Studies* (2022).

## ORCID

Yonas Tesema  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3308-2263>

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<sup>14</sup> Conventionally, Ethiopian authors are listed by their first names.

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