

Typologies and Dynamics of Urban Growth Projects in Ethiopia: A Discursive Analysis

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Abstract

This paper analyses the typological evolution and discursive construction of urban growth projects (UGPs) during the EPRDF and Prosperity Party (PP) periods in Ethiopia. Using typological analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the study identifies three types of UGPs, namely housing and infrastructure, urban renewal, and industrial parks, and reveals their continuity at the material level despite their different development patterns. Despite the Prosperity Party's critique of the EPRDF model, both use UGPs as a legitimising tool for governance. The study highlights that UGPs consolidate authoritarian governance pathways, shift discursive logics from state-led industrialisation to market-oriented global competition, and document grassroots tensions between national narratives and local realities.

Keywords: Ethiopia; Discourse; Urban Growth Projects

1 Introduction

Ethiopia is one of the fastest growing economies and urbanising countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The rapid expansion of existing urban areas and the significant increase in the number of new cities highlight the remarkable trend of urban growth in Ethiopia. Up to 2015, Ethiopia's GDP growth rate exceeded 10%, and although the growth rate has slowed in recent years, it remains above 5% per annum (World Bank, 2025). Urbanisation has also progressed at a remarkable pace alongside economic growth, with an urbanisation rate of 23% by 2022, indicating a period of rapid urbanisation. According to the Blue Ribbon Panel Report, the urbanisation rate is projected to reach 37.5% by 2050 (Ethiopia2050). According to Ethiopia's Ten-Year Development Plan, the country has approximately 4,000 urban areas, while the 2007 National Population and Housing Census recorded over 2,000 urban areas. The significant difference between these figures not only reflects adjustments in statistical methodologies, but also highlights the rapid urban development that Ethiopia has experienced over the past decade. In the context of rapid urbanisation, the Ethiopian government has long promoted urbanisation and modernisation at the national level through a series of large-scale Urban Growth Projects (UGPs). These projects are not only spatial development initiatives, but also crucial tools for national governance, economic restructuring and the construction of political legitimacy.

I tracked three major types of urban development projects implemented in Ethiopia after the collapse of the Derg regime in 1992, with a particular focus on comparing project dynamics during the EPRDF and Prosperity Party eras. We found that the Prosperity Party emerged as a challenge to the EPRDF's failed attempts at democratisation and ethnic issue management, promoting political and economic policies that were fundamentally different from, and even in conflict with, the EPRDF's vanguard capitalism. It has widely criticised the material legacy of the EPRDF era, pointing out that numerous large-scale development projects (such as the urban light rail, industrial parks and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway) have faced controversy and challenges in implementation, reflecting the UGP's 'fragility' and 'insecurity' at the material level. However, the two parties share continuity in the types of large-scale projects they choose to develop and similarities in the material forms they adopt. Nevertheless, the symbolic functions of these projects in national narratives, the construction of ethnic identities and the maintenance of regime legitimacy remain powerful. To explain this contradiction between ideological denial and practical consistency, we further introduce the method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), following a research path of 'textual analysis-interpretation-explanation', to explore the discursive practices of the UGP in different discursive contexts, as well as their continuity and discontinuity in the ideological dimension. Focusing on the linguistic construction practices of Ethiopian discourse, this study attempts to explain the representation of the discourse of large-scale urban projects from the perspective of critical discourse analysis, demonstrating its role within the framework of national ideological formation and governance logic.

This study first outlines the “toolkit” for promoting the growth of urban spaces in the Global South. Second, we describe the typology of urban growth in Ethiopia through its urban policy documents and urbanisation policies, and compare the similarities and transformations in their trajectories between the EPRDF period and the PP period. In the fifth part, we analyse representative discourse cases to examine their constitutive functions, especially in relation to the macro-political environment, and the interpretive role of macro-discourse in the projects.

2. A toolkit for spatial growth in sub-Saharan African cities

Under the dual influence of globalisation and neo-liberal development, cities in sub-Saharan Africa are widely adopting different urban development projects. Through radical ‘character-shaping’ approaches, they are reconfiguring territorial resources, transforming social structures and pre-emptively establishing urban economic systems (Ansar et al., 2017; Flyvbjerg, 2014) to help emerging cities - especially megacities in sub-Saharan Africa - move towards the vision of becoming “global cities” (Hirschman, 2014). These tools are diverse, including radical mega-urban renewal projects, new city concepts such as smart cities and eco-cities, and location-based industrial policies represented by industrial parks (IPs) and special economic zones (SEZs). The spatial growth instruments of cities in sub-Saharan Africa can be divided into two categories based on their interaction with the local economic system and urban structure: inward-oriented and outward-oriented.

The core of outward-looking spatial policy tools lies in the creation of ‘hyper-localised’ spatial hubs to effectively connect cities in the Global South to the global network. These tools often break through existing spatial patterns and functional divisions of urban systems, constructing new engines of growth that are relatively parallel to the local economic system but serve global capital flows and supply chain integration. Among these, place-based policy instruments, represented by industrial parks (IPs) and special economic zones (SEZs), are widely seen as the key link between industrialisation and urbanisation (Kihiko, 2018; Shen et al., 2023; Weldesilassie et al., 2017a). In sub-Saharan Africa, industrialisation is widely recognised as an effective way of improving factor productivity, promoting labour transfer and optimising resource allocation. Faced with the twin pressures of urban sprawl and rapid population growth in the context of globalisation, SEZs and IPs have therefore been given high priority by governments as important strategies for promoting urban growth.

In addition to IPs and SEZs, new cities have also emerged as an important spatial form in recent years. Compared with traditional industrial parks, new cities are more flexible in terms of spatial location and functional positioning, usually located on the outskirts of cities, with diverse structures and composite functions. These new cities are not only key components of the country’s overall political and economic strategy, but also take on the task of promoting the development of specific industrial sectors (such as information technology, ecological and environmental protection, and smart city construction) (Côté-Roy and Moser, 2022). It is worth noting that new city projects are often led by private capital or multinational corporations, targeting the middle-class consumer market (Keeton, 2019), with the core objective of attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) and stimulating economic growth (Watson, 2014). In contrast to SEZs and IPs, which prioritise the integration of industry and urban development, new cities place greater emphasis on spatial image, livability and the incorporation of global governance concepts, serving as ‘showcase spaces’ that link local and global contexts.

Inward-looking UGP aims to address structural deficiencies in existing urban systems by activating the productivity of local elements through spatial interventions, typically implemented within urban boundaries. This category includes mega urban renewal projects and green space projects within cities, such as light rail infrastructure projects. MURP serves as a tool for large-scale restoration and redevelopment of urban spaces, reshaping the topography of existing large cities as part of efforts to strengthen the economic competitiveness of megacities in the context of global competition (Swyngedouw et al., 2002). Due to widespread structural problems in sub-Saharan African cities, such as weak infrastructure and inadequate governance frameworks (Kamana et al., 2024) African cities in a quest for modernity and prosperity have been urgently playing catch up to deal with the increasing demand for adequate urban systems and infrastructure. At the turn of the 21st century, many spatial planning models, technological trends, environmental challenges, and socio-economic realities are influencing African cities’ dynamics largely causing confusion and a lack of consistent planning policies. To efficiently guide a coherent and coordinated vision, frame an integrated long-term spatial logic, and give a precise direction for sustainable urban development, this paper aims to develop a localized and contextualised analysis of urban planning challenges and development strategies shaping African cities. The study provides a broad perspective

looking at the potentiality of spatial planning practices to envision and transform urban life by prospecting integrated urban planning and development strategies to face increasing urban challenges in Africa. Through Systematic Literature Review (SLR, urban renewal in these cities is based on rapid urbanisation and slum expansion, and aims to comprehensively and radically reshape the existing spatial structures of several African cities (Grant, 2015). Drawing on examples from South Africa and Ethiopia, MURPs can also be part of broader modernisation reforms that follow the neoliberal logic of urban development (Lindell, 2019), accompanied by global mobility and gentrification (Hayes and Zaban, 2020). National governments drive regional development through large-scale investment, using the externalities of urbanisation to stimulate other sectors of the economy (Zhang et al., 2023). These cities undergoing large-scale reconstruction are typically the capitals of African countries, which use MURPs to reshape the urban landscape and spatial layout, thereby demonstrating the power of the national government (AFRICA, 2018).

3. Methodology

This study aims to analyse the typological evolution of UGPs in Ethiopia through different historical periods and the logic underlying their discursive construction. Given the complexity of urban development policies in the dual dimensions of 'materiality-symbolism' and 'practice-narrative' (Smith, 2016), single spatial or institutional analytical approaches are insufficient to fully explain how UGPs are continuously conceived, legitimised and adapted as tools of development governance. Therefore, this study adopts a research approach that combines typological analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to reveal the spatial practice mechanisms and discursive legitimisation logic of UGPs within the political-economic structure.

3.1 Theoretical Methods

First, this paper uses typological analysis to identify the main characteristics of urban growth projects in Ethiopia across different time periods in terms of policy orientation, spatial form and governance models, and identifies four types of UGPs represented by mega-infrastructure projects, urban renewal, industrial parks/special economic zones. This classification not only facilitates spatial comparison, but also reflects the interactive logic between UGP and national development strategies, and forms the basis for structural analysis.

In order to understand the operational mechanisms of UGP projects not only as "material entities" but also as "symbolic representations", this study also introduces CDA as a core explanatory tool. Based on a constructivist theoretical stance, which posits that social reality is not an objective, independently existing entity, but a social process of constant construction, negotiation and reproduction through language and discourse in specific contexts (Fairclough, 2013; Van Dijk, 2015), discourse exists in a dialectical relationship with the social world (Mendes et al., 2024). The core assumption of discourse analysis is that "discourse not only reflects policy but also constitutes policy itself", with policy practices and discourse structures being mutually embedded and co-constructing reality (Hansen, 2013). CDA focuses on the role of discourse in structural elements such as power relations, ideology, institutional arrangements and social identity (Van Dijk, 2015). The theoretical tradition of CDA includes two main strands: the Marxist-oriented macro-historical discourse analysis, which focuses on the relationship between power structures and ideology; and the post-structuralist-oriented micro-discourse practice analysis, which focuses on the detailed interpretation of discourse practices in specific contexts (Sonn and Park, 2023). This study draws on the macro-level analytical approach of the Marxist tradition (Lees, 2004) and focuses on how discourse shapes the meaning and practice of urban growth projects in the intertwined power structure of state, capital and society. It situates linguistic practice within institutional settings and historical processes, revealing the dynamic relationship between events and discourse in UGP, as well as the diachronic changes of UGP in different institutional settings.

This paper introduces Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional analytical framework (Lees, 2004), namely text analysis, discourse practice analysis and social practice analysis. Text analysis focuses on the use of vocabulary, grammatical structures, rhetorical devices and narrative strategies. The discourse practice level examines the production context of policy texts in relation to their interactive relationships with other texts, speeches and discussions. The social practice dimension discusses the ideology and power effects carried by discourse in specific social contexts, revealing how discourse shapes institutional arrangements and spatial practices.

3.2 Data and Method

This paper collects policy documents, project planning texts, speeches by leaders, memoranda of cooperation, mainstream media reports, and official promotional materials at multiple scales and levels, such as official development planning texts, development project texts, and influential media materials such as Addis Fortune, Addis Standard, and ENA. These texts constitute the 'official expression' sources for the discourse construction of the UGPs and provide the primary corpus for discourse analysis.

In addition, the research draws on fieldwork conducted in Ethiopia in 2024 and online and offline tracking of Ethiopian developments since 2016 to obtain interview material from a range of stakeholders, including government officials, Chinese company managers, local officials, project residents, academics, and media professionals. In addition to formal interviews, the research team conducted ongoing field observations and informal interactions during visits to the Eastern Industrial Park, Bole Lemi Park, and Corridor Plan sites during the UGP, and recorded informal conversations to further supplement the micro-level understanding of discourse practices.

4. Continuity of Ethiopian UGPs

Since the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) came to power, Ethiopia has promoted three types of urban growth projects: first, housing and infrastructure projects, which are at the core of the EPRDF's strategy and are used to promote regional economic integration and national spatial integration; second, urban renewal projects, which were systematically implemented during the PP (Prosperity Party) period; and third, location-based industrial park development projects, which promote the coordinated development of industrialisation and urbanisation.

4.1 Mega-infrastructure

Large-scale infrastructure projects are key tools in the EPRDF's urban growth strategy, particularly in addressing the population pressure, urban poverty and developmental imbalances caused by rapid urbanisation. The EPRDF government emphasises strengthening regional connectivity and national unity through state-led infrastructure projects. Under the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP), such projects not only serve to reshape the spatial structure of the country, but also symbolise the construction of a modern state.

In terms of transport infrastructure, the Addis Ababa Light Rail Transit (AALRT) and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway are representative projects. The AALRT, which began construction in 2011 and was completed in 2015, is Africa's first electrified urban light rail system. It was built by the China Railway Group and the China International Engineering Consulting Corporation, financed primarily by low-interest loans from the China Exim Bank, and reflects the urban planning concept of Transit-Oriented Development (TOD). The 752km Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway began construction in 2011, began trial operations in 2016 and was officially opened in 2018. It is East Africa's first modern electrified railway, built to Chinese standards by China Railway Group and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation. It serves as a model for integrating the Belt and Road Initiative into Ethiopia's national development strategy.

While the policy logic and implementation pathways for infrastructure development underwent adjustments during the PP era, they continued to adhere to the basic characteristics of state-led, foreign investment-driven and engineering-integrated development established during the EPRDF era. Building on traditional road, rail and hydropower infrastructure development, the Abiy Ahmed government has continued to prioritise renewable energy projects, including wind farms such as Ashegoda, Adama I & II and Aysha. These projects not only meet the energy needs of industrial zones, but also support rural electrification and the Green Legacy initiative. Infrastructure projects during this period also showed more diversified characteristics, such as the experimentation with public-private partnership (PPP) models, the introduction of private capital, and the promotion of local government involvement in early project planning to improve implementation efficiency. At the same time, some projects attempted to localise the industrial chain, such as wind power projects that introduced local equipment manufacturing and tower production enterprises to explore ways for industrial synergy and development.

4.2 Urban renewal projects

During the EPRDF era, urban renewal was in its initial exploratory phase, focusing mainly on the spatial renovation of a small number of public nodes in urban core areas and the construction of civic amenities such as squares, parks and memorials. These projects showed clear characteristics of national image building and the strengthening of capital city functions. Overall, however, they remained fragmented and engineering-driven, lacking a systematic spatial intervention logic.

The Integrated Housing Development Programme (IHDP), launched in 2004, was the first institutionalised large-scale urban plan of this period, aiming to achieve multiple objectives such as spatial governance, social stability and urban image reconstruction through the construction of housing and the provision of infrastructure to address informal settlements. In Addis Ababa, the programme built nearly 500,000 low-income housing units over 20 years, primarily in the city's peripheries and secondary centres such as Bole-Summit, Yeka-Abado and Bole Arabsa, and extending to regions such as Legetafo-Legedadi in the Oromia region. This formed a model of urban expansion based on "residential orientation", which encouraged inter-district commuting and labour mobility.

During the PP era, urban renewal increasingly prioritised improving the city's image and global competitiveness, promoting a number of commercial, high-end and iconic urban projects, including the ADWA Museum and Unity Park, which are national symbolic engineering projects. Real estate and business development projects such as the 'Future City Economic Zone' (Lemi Future City) led by China Communications Investment Group, the La Gare Complex, Gelan Gura Village and Windows of Africa have also become key drivers of land restructuring and urban form transformation.

Launched in 2022, the Corridor Development Plan (CDP) has been hailed as 'the first development-centred public urban project since 2020' and represents the PP government's most ambitious urban spatial strategy. The CDP focuses on regional centres and major urban nodes, with road upgrades at the forefront, and integrates infrastructure network upgrades (including drainage, electricity and internet), slum rehabilitation, public service facility construction, tourism revitalisation and land development, reflecting the multiple objectives of African cities under the modernisation paradigm, environmental utopianism and the 'park city' ideal.

The most representative component of the CDP is the Addis Ababa Corridor Development Plan (AACDP), which was launched by the Addis Ababa City Administration in December 2022 and covers all of the city's sub-cities. The corridors in the plan range in length from 3.1 kilometres to 40.4 kilometres, with functions ranging from transport connectivity to urban renewal, such as the Anbesa Garage-Jakros-Goro section and the Kasanchis-Meskel Square-Arat Kilo axis. Each corridor links residential, commercial, industrial and entertainment zones, promoting multi-dimensional urban regeneration.

In addition, the plan includes two waterfront development projects: the Qebena River Corridor and the Entoto-Peacock River Corridor. These projects redefine the future development direction of the city by restructuring spatial interfaces. According to a relevant official from the Addis Ababa Planning Bureau (who was involved in the 2017-2027 Structural Plan and the design of the AACDP), although the AACDP, as an independent project, has a certain degree of 'planning exceptionality', its spatial structure still inherits to a large extent the urban structural design established during the EPRDF period, continuing the TOD concept and the high-density mixed-use development strategy of Zone 2.

4.3 Place-Based Industrial and Urbanisation Projects

IP projects represent the high degree of integration of the 'spatial expansion-industrial transformation' logic in Ethiopia's urban growth strategy. Since the establishment of the Eastern Industrial Park (EIP) through Sino-Ethiopian cooperation in mid-2007, Ethiopia has begun to formulate a spatial strategy for industrialisation based on the "enclave" model - the establishment of industrial parks in specific areas to attract the relocation of production and boost employment, exports and economic growth.

The EPRDF government sees SEZs and IPs as key instruments of its industrial policy, combining urban planning (Tesfaye, 2021), infrastructure development and investment promotion measures to establish functional parks in key cities (Tang, 2019).

The Ethiopian Industrial Zone Development Corporation (EIZDC), established in early 2010, serves as the national implementing agency for park development and was reorganised in 2014 as the Industrial Park Development Corporation (IPDC) to centrally coordinate the development and investment promotion of state-owned parks (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2018).

Since the establishment of institutions and legal frameworks for industrial park development, Ethiopia began to systematically plan and construct industrial parks. Currently, Ethiopia has 13 state-owned industrial parks, including the Bole Lemi Industrial Park, the Bahir Dar Industrial Park and the Hawassa Ecological Industrial Park, as well as 6 private industrial parks, 4 agro-processing parks and 2 public-private partnership special economic zones (Gao and Wang, 2025). However, criticism of Ethiopia's industrial park strategy has outweighed praise, with media, academic literature and official government reports widely pointing to its limited role in promoting industrial transformation, creating urban linkages and driving external infrastructure development (Weldesilassie et al., 2017b). The New Property Party and Prime Minister Abiy have adopted an ambiguous stance towards the legacy of the EPRDF, such as its intellectual property policy, while federal government officials at all levels have expressed a preference for economic zones in both public statements and private conversations (Wang and Zhang, 2024). In April 2024, the Ethiopian Parliament approved the Notification No. 1322/2024 (Economic Zone Declaration) to regulate Special Economic Zones (SEZs) [v]. In September 2024, the management teams of the country's industrial parks were required to transition to economic zones within a short timeframe, and the EIC established a new project office to oversee this process. At the same time, the EIC announced the upgrading of 10 out of 13 IPs under the IPDC to SEZs, including industrial parks such as Adama, Bahir Dar, Bole Lemi and Jimma. All private (mostly Chinese-invested) industrial parks were excluded from this process. An interview with an EIC consultant supported this view: *"Private parks (investors) can choose whether to upgrade to an SEZ, provided the procedures are followed. We are not currently taking any proactive measures to urge them (to upgrade)"*. Taking the AWSEZ as an example, the construction of the ATSEZ, including the land preparation activities carried out by the city government before making the land available to CCCC, is part of the Capital Corridor Development Plan since 2023, marking the first integration of economic zones into the city's strategic framework. The ongoing Addis Ababa Corridor Development Project connects other areas of the capital with the ATSEZ in the Gotera region, positioning it beyond a traditional industrial park to become what the mayor has described as a "new city within the city" repositioning Addis Ababa's global urban competitiveness, commercialising land and becoming a major international shopping destination.



Figure 1: Project render of ATSEZ

Source : https://en.ccccltd.cn/xwzx/ywfb/202408/t20240823_215757.html

5 Discussion: The Discourse of Urban Growth Projects in the Dynamic Structure of National Governance

UGPs are not only tools for economic development and spatial restructuring, but also important arenas for the operation of state power and the production of ideology. Different types of UGPs are always embedded in the national development strategies and political governance logics of specific historical stages during their implementation, and their discourse forms and institutional settings exhibit complex dynamics. This chapter uses CDA to explore how the discursive dimensions of UGPs reflect, construct and shape national governance structures, and to analyse their manifestations in legitimacy construction, ideological production and discursive negotiation.

5.1 The Continuity of Power Discourse: The Multiform Expression of Authoritarianism

Although Ethiopia has undergone changes in its political structure and ruling ideology during the transition from the EPRDF to the PP, and the urban political discourse has been adapted and updated accordingly, the logic of power and the pathways of governance exhibit a high degree of continuity. This continuity is manifested in the state's continued dominant control over urban growth projects, their high degree of embedding in the spatial discourse, and the continued use of urban development as a tool for reshaping national identity and constructing legitimacy.

Three categories of urban growth projects - including IHDP, symbolic urban node projects (such as Unity Park and the ADWA Museum), and CDP - differ in their specific implementation content, policy objectives, and mobilising language. However, they all serve a common governance purpose: to reinforce the dominance of the state in the urban space, to shape the national development discourse, and to demonstrate national capacity in the context of globalisation. They concretise national development goals at the spatial level, mobilise collective emotional identity at the social level, and reaffirm the legitimacy of the regime at the political level.

The symbolic significance of these projects is particularly striking. In the IHDP, large-scale public housing not only attempts to solve the problem of urban slums, but also reflects the state's definition and norms of 'modern life'. Cultural landmark projects such as the ADWA Museum and Unity Park spatialise national historical narratives and the ideology of ethnic unity, reinforcing identification with national identity; the Corridor Plan, with its grand narrative of 'connecting to the future', projects a modern image externally while legitimising governance internally, serving as a multifaceted tool for urban governance and national construction. Media, government propaganda and policy texts often use discourses such as 'global gateway', 'model for African urban revival' and 'new spaces for the future' to legitimise development visions and integrate them into urban spatial practices.

More importantly, these projects translate national visions into tangible spatial entities that shape 'visible development'. In a context of relatively limited fiscal resources and administrative capacity, the visibility of development becomes a crucial mechanism for the exercise of power. By prioritising resources for a few symbolic projects, the government creates a visual landscape that conveys the state's control over the future, exerting a powerful perceptual influence on both the public and external observers. This approach perpetuates the spatial governance logic of authoritarian regimes, where 'symbolism trumps substance' - even if the actual services and welfare outcomes of projects are limited, their discursive efficacy can be manifested far beyond the projects themselves, providing a visualised legitimisation for the state-led development logic.

In this process, discourse is not just a packaging language for policies, but an integral part of governance. Although the 'national imagination' behind urban growth projects takes different forms at different stages, it is highly normative and exclusive in nature, defining what constitutes the 'ideal space', the 'ideal citizen' and the 'ideal development'. This is the multifaceted expression of authoritarian governance discourse: it achieves political control through physical space and regulates social expectations and collective memory through cultural narratives. Urban space thus becomes a vehicle for ideology, and projects themselves are imbued with symbolic and emotional significance that transcends their functional purpose.

Urban growth projects are therefore not only economic and technical development practices, but also key tools of state governance discourse and symbolic politics. They embed symbolic structures of regime legitimacy in urban space and serve as important strategies for maintaining the ruling order 'in the name of development', revealing the deep-seated interaction between the continuity of urban policies and the symbolic logic of governance under Ethiopia's authoritarian governance.

5.2 From “developmental” to “development” The shift in development discourse

Ethiopia's development discourse has undergone significant changes under different regimes. From the 'developmental state' discourse of the EPRDF era to the 'development' discourse centred on governance performance and market orientation under the PP party, the nature and discourse logic of the UGP has also undergone a transformation.

During the EPRDF era, the development discourse was characterised by state-led initiatives, planning priorities and structural transformation, emphasising the promotion of 'industrial catch-up' and 'spatial balance' through state-led large-scale infrastructure and industrial policies. For example, Arkebe Oqubay, a key figure in Meles Zenawi's senior official team, frequently cited China's reform and opening up and the East Asian miracle as development experiences, and proposed the strategic goals of 'structural transformation' and 'industrial catch-up', closely linking the country's industrialisation efforts with China's assistance[i][ii]. The discourse of this period had a strong institutional learning orientation, describing development as a collective national goal whose legitimacy was derived from the state's right to shape the 'future'. This development logic emphasises state-led development, the prioritisation of large-scale projects and the institutional design of a developmental state. The development trajectory is based on structural economic conditions, a political party with a vanguard ideology of centralised policy and a capitalist market. Rents are seen as a strategic resource to expand the regime's economic base, redistribute wealth to integrate different social strata into the EPRDF, and promote sectoral and regional integration[iii]. These projects are directly linked to the EPRDF's state development discourse and its ideology-driven, organisation-based political system.

Since Abiy Ahmed came to power, the development discourse has placed greater emphasis on governance performance and market logic, in line with the state's radical privatisation of state-owned assets. The promotion of urban renewal projects often uses terms such as 'livability', 'connectivity' and 'transformation', representing a shift in the development narrative from statism to urban entrepreneurship. This shift in discourse structure reflects not only the evolution of development concepts, but also the shift in the state's approach to legitimacy - from “development promise legitimacy” to “governance performance legitimacy”.

In addition, the development discourse expresses the competitive aspirations of the global city, selectively defining the actors of development rather than the socialist ideology of equity and integrated development emphasised during the developmentalist period. These projects became the PP's standard discourse for implementing neoliberal reforms, which gradually evolved into an entrepreneurial discursive framework centred on the 'image of the global city', 'investability' and 'efficiency of spatial governance'. Corporate discursive frameworks. Promotional materials and government statements use terms such as 'vibrant', 'liveable', 'competitive', 'transformation' in an attempt to transform urban space into a showcase for attracting capital. “(AACDP) is the first development-focused public project since 2020, when completed, will deliver significant long-term benefits to relevant stakeholders.”

5.3 Counter-narratives and bargaining practices in the discursive space

Although the content of the discourse has been constantly adjusted under different regime changes, its logic of power and path of implementation show a high degree of continuity. The discursive forms of the three types of urban growth projects, although different, serve to consolidate national spatial dominance and the development discourse.

Urban growth projects are highly symbolic in the political space of Essex. They are not only tools for development, but are also used to carry the national imagination, demonstrate political achievement and guide identity. For example, the ADWA Museum has been described as a “spiritual symbol of national unity” and the Corridor Project as 'Addis Ababa's gateway to the world city'.

By projecting and legitimising visions, the government creates a tangible visibility of development and reinforces its discourse with spatial objects. This symbolic politics plays a key role in the production of regime legitimacy, especially in the context of the state's relatively limited financial and administrative capacity, and the UGP is imbued with political and emotional significance beyond its function. Each of these discourses, although very different in form, has a normative role and is an integral part of the discourse of authoritarian government, with utility usually manifesting itself outside the project as a vehicle for the ideology of a given period.

Dominant discourses are not ironclad and are not always fully accepted or internalised. In specific local practices, the implementation of UGPs is often accompanied by a complex process of re-semanticisation, generating multiple negotiations and tensions around planning visions, spatial legitimacy and distributive justice. In the process of sinking, the national discourse faces both the reproduction of legitimacy and the challenge of resistance and counter-narratives. In the field research, some of the residents interviewed interpreted the 'modernisation' project as a process of 'displacement and exclusion', questioning its inclusiveness and local benefits. For example, a trader who has lived around Unity Park for almost a decade said of the park's construction: 'It's not our park, it's for tourists to take pictures of. For her, spatial regeneration does not mean a redistribution of public resources, but rather 'invisible exclusion' under the guise of 'visible development'. This micro-discursive practice reveals the tension between the dominant discourse of the state and the lived experience of the locality, as well as the multiple meanings of 'development' as a discourse of governance. Not only ordinary residents, but also local technical officials often play the role of negotiators and 'translators' in the implementation of projects. Not only do they have to carry out the spatial transformation tasks assigned by the central government, but they also have to respond to local realities of land disputes, relocation and resettlement, social stability, and other issues. As a result, some urban planners have confessed in interviews that in designing UGP projects they have to 'find a compromise between the national vision and local affordability', an act of mediation that reflects the 'gaping operating space' of planning in an authoritarian environment.

In addition, outside the mainstream discourse, some independent media and international observers in Ethiopia have gradually developed a counter-critical approach to the UGP discourse. Local media such as Addis Standard and Addis Fortune have repeatedly pointed out the lack of contractual transparency in large-scale infrastructure projects built by Chinese companies (e.g. the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, the 'beautification of Shegele' project and the Oriental Industrial Park). Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, the 'Beautification of Shegele' project and the Oriental Industrial Park) have been criticised for their non-transparent contracts, unsustainable finances and limited local employment and technology transfer. These criticisms not only challenge the national narrative of 'development success'[ii], but also reflect the fact that there is a lack of transparency and financial sustainability behind the scenes of development projects. They also reflect the asymmetrical power relations inherent in development projects.

Although these critical voices are often subject to political regulation, censorship restrictions and even exclusion from official planning texts, they form the 'echo of marginal discourse' in the ecology of urban discourse and continue to influence public discussions and policy adjustments. These counter-narratives have not completely undermined the dominant discourse of the state, but they have forced it to make compromises and adjustments in practice, reflecting the 'limited space for negotiation' in an authoritarian environment. Ultimately, the UGP project is not a 'linear' process of development, but a field in which multiple forces, discourses and practices are intertwined. The generation of meaning is not predetermined at the outset, but is negotiated, contested and reconstructed in dynamic power relations. It is within these local tensions and negotiations that the true politics of the UGP project are revealed.

Notes

See <https://allafrica.com/stories/202409030387.html>

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