

4. Conclusion

Ethiopia has entered the modern age. The second most populous emerging country in Africa has successfully launched a state-led process of progress that is geared towards clear goals: the expansion of the manufacturing industry with a strong focus on textile industry, export orientation and agricultural industrialization. At the same time, the multi-ethnic state is considered to be still one of the poorest countries in the world. (Cf. Brüne, 2020).

Melber (2021) rightly asks whether the debate about the emerging middle class in the African societies is not a myth. He criticizes that this broad definition of the middle class apparently includes anyone who is not starving.¹ Melber points out that many workers have no social protection beyond their families and that families are under considerable pressure, not at least due to urban-rural and inter-generational gaps. (Ibid.)

A commonly used argument is that the textile industry is merely a stepping stone to an advanced level of industrial development, where higher wages can be paid. For workers, however, it is a matter of survival today. They weigh up carefully whether the job is worth it for them.

Brüne (2020) addresses the social and political challenges that accompany Ethiopia's foreign trade and investment-driven transformation: the economy, which is still predominantly characterized by subsistence farming, is confronted with rapidly growing cities, low-priced industrial parks, and land grabbing. To keep up with rapid population growth, the country is challenged to create more than two million jobs annually.²

The textile sector faces conspicuous absenteeism and high labor turnover, which hampers production outputs. However, discussions with managers in the context of the JLU study indicate that some companies already achieve higher production levels but do not disclose them in order to maintain their argument for low wages. Conflicts over land use rights are another obstacle to industrial development. Brüne elucidates that Ethiopia's small-scale subsistence farmers traditionally had no land ownership, but only temporary rights of use. The state's

1 See also Neubert's study on middle-class concepts (2024).

2 Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ): Investing to create jobs in Ethiopia, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/103514.html>.

attempt to reform (or rather overcome) traditional land rights is causing serious and violent conflicts. Brüne emphasizes that it is essential not to marginalize the majority of the population, but to promote domestic production without jeopardizing the livelihoods of impoverished smallholder subsistence farmers. Because after all, according to Brüne, it makes no sense to lease land to foreign investors (land that has traditionally been farmed by smallholder farmers) with the result that the land for example will be used for subsidized cultivation and export of cut flowers³ to Holland. At the same time this land is no longer available for food cultivation. (Ibid.)

It is fair to say that only a small portion of the population benefits from this development. For many, however, it proves to be highly problematic. Precarious factory work, violent conflicts over land, land grabbing, and a prime minister who is building himself a fifteen Billion USD luxury complex, including palaces, villas, and resorts for the elite (Birara, 2025). This is the reality in a country that was long considered a beacon of hope in the Horn of Africa. Moreover, the consequences of the climate crisis alone could wipe out much of the economic progress that has been made. The textile industry itself consumes an immense amount of resources (especially electricity and water) and is responsible for massive water pollution worldwide (cf. Lutter et al., 2011). It is not without reason that the industry has almost completely disappeared in developed countries and has relocated its production to emerging developing countries mostly in Asia, from where the goods are exported to the USA or Europe. The final price that consumers pay for a T-shirt does usually not cover the actual social, environmental and economic costs incurred on the way to the end consumer.

For many Ethiopians, what is referred to as 'modernization' means a deterioration in their living conditions. In the region of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), for example, the nomadic groups living there were promised 'villagization,' which is essentially forced resettlement. And the modernization of agriculture – i.e. moving away from hook ploughs to large tractors – does not benefit small farmers, but, as with all green revolutions, those who own the capital (Shiva 2016). Given the dominance of a global economic monoculture, there seem to be no arguments against the destruction of livelihoods in the course of modernization processes. However, it should not be overlooked that this plunges masses of peasants and nomads from modest poverty into destitution and divides society into those who profit from it and those who become impoverished.

Industrialization in Ethiopia is driven by an ideology of modernization that, on the one hand, is still associated with great hopes but, on the other, has also been disenchanted, as can be seen, for example, in the realities of women workers

3 What's more, the flowers are heavily contaminated with pesticides and pollute the environment at the production sites.

in the textile industry. In academic discourses on modernization, there has long been talk of the ‘non-sustainability of Western modernity’ and the emergence of a different, more disillusioned modernity that is gradually and conflictually asserting itself and adapting to new geopolitical realities (Blühdorn, 2024).

Discussions about progress and development are increasingly focusing on technical solutions, while the idea of prosperity for all no longer seems credible. Post-colonial discourses on development often take place in a bubble of intellectual elites, where fundamental and simple human questions can hardly be addressed. Gronemeyer (2025) contradicts these tendencies: “I believe we should not stop looking at the living conditions of ordinary, poor people and asking what really helps them.”⁴ He points out that Ethiopian textile factories also offer chances of survival: “given the population growth, the climate crisis and the problematic modernization policy, many poor people naturally have no choice but to rush to the newly created jobs to earn some money.” (Ibid.)

The aim of this book was to elaborate the root causes of high labor turnover and absenteeism in the Ethiopian textile and garment industry in the context of social upheaval. Interviews were conducted with workers and executives in companies in the industrial parks, mainly at Bole Lemi Industrial Park (BLIP) and Hawassa Industrial Park (HIP). Also relatives of workers, community members and farmers had been interviewed. Despite a range of different findings, one singular issue was dominant: that of low compensation. Ironically, a considerable number of workers surveyed reported to have to seek financial support from families living in the countryside in spite of being wage-earners.⁵ Compensation plays a central role in the high turnover of employees, though not the sole one. However, the problem has not yet been seriously addressed by companies. Many of the workers surveyed said that they like factory work as such. In addition to dissatisfaction with remuneration, however, a majority expressed critical to very critical views about working conditions. There are both internal and external factors that don’t make a job in a textile and garment factory so attractive. In addition to the question of salary, the following aspects are particularly worth mentioning:

1. Incentives: the companies’ strategy of combining low basic wages with performance-related bonuses is intended to create incentives to increase production output. The companies offer various monetary and non-monetary incentives (such as bus transport, canteen food, attendance bonus, or productivity bonus). However, not all employees qualify for the performance-related bonus,

4 Conversation with Prof Dr Reimer Gronemeyer (principle investigator of the JLU study) on 29.5.2025.

5 For a summary of the study results see also Ghosh (2023).

which is a key component for them in making ends meet. This applies in particular to new employees in the training period, for whom no incentives are yet provided. The fact that most resignations occur in the first few months of employment is apparently linked to the fact that performance-related bonuses are usually awarded to employees with advanced skills.

2. Motivation: women take up employment in the textile and garment industry for a variety of reasons. For many, it is simply a matter of survival. Some say, 'It's better than sitting at home.' However, the appeal of urban life is undoubtedly very strong. Accelerated individualization promises enormous opportunities to free oneself from constraints that stand in the way of personal development and fulfilment.
3. Education: one of the reasons for high rates of absenteeism in the garment companies is that a significant number of workers are studying in the city alongside their factory work (reported in particular in the Hawassa Industrial Park). They come to the city primarily to pursue their educational goals, which they hope will lead to social advancement. They tend to view factory work as a temporary job to earn a living, while the focus is on completing their education.
4. Working conditions: workers suffer from long working hours and high workloads. On top of their regular working hours (48 hours per week), many work overtime to supplement their low wages. Obviously, they have little time for personal matters, resting or social life and responsibilities. They also say they struggle with sitting or standing for long periods of time, which causes them health issues. Further, workers are dissatisfied with the canteen food at work. They demand better treatment from their employer – including in terms of the tone used when addressing them.
5. Leave: employees report that it is difficult for them to obtain off-days from their employers. This leads to them occasionally being absent from work without permission. According to employees, there is also a lack of acceptance on the part of HR managers in the event of absence due to illness. Apparently, companies sometimes do not grant the statutory holiday entitlement of 16 days during the first year of employment, which can also contribute to employee turnover and unauthorized absence.
6. Transport: workers cite a lack of transport options as a problem when they want to visit their families in the countryside. Transport is often unreliable, making it difficult to return to work on time.
7. Housing: due to the lack of affordable housing near the industrial parks, workers are often forced to seek cheap accommodation on the outskirts of towns, which means long commutes to and from work as well as long and exhausting working days.

8. Contrasting perceptions and interests: the perceptions of employers and employees differ greatly in many respects. While employers complain that employees lack long-term prospects and career orientation, workers do not see attractive opportunities for career development within the company that employs them, what they themselves cite as one of the main reasons for high staff turnover. Overall, the sector is geared toward employing mainly unskilled and low-paid workers as machine operators. Career advancement opportunities are limited for structural reasons. To retain workers, companies therefore primarily use performance-related incentives and non-wage benefits. Further, managers frequently complain about the 'poor work ethic' among the employees. They claim that the 'mindset' of workers and a lack of experience make it difficult for employees to adapt to the industrial world of work. Workers, on the other hand, feel that their employers lack understanding of their needs and situation. Unlike their superiors, they believe that they work hard. Overall, companies try to keep their investments in the labor force as low as possible, while the employees do not like to work just for survival. Added to this are cultural differences between the predominantly foreign management and Ethiopian employees, which is also reflected in the divide between local communities and industrial parks.
9. Future prospects: interviews with workers show that many would like to be self-employed. Relatives, community members and farmers also declare that a better life in the city could be only achieved if you run your own small business. However, this requires start-up capital, which many do not have. Even buying a sewing machine may require years of saving. Textile workers say that with their own sewing machine, they could work at home – even in rural areas, where life is much cheaper anyway. This frequently expressed wish underscores once again that under the given conditions, workers generally do not see long-term prospects in their jobs in the garment factories.
10. Role of family and gender relations: workers' parents or life partners usually support the decision to work in the textile industry. However, families carefully weigh up the pros and cons, and if they believe that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages, they encourage their relatives to give up their job and look for other employment. Overall, families and couples decide together on household expenses. Single women often use their salaries to cover their own living expenses. Partners who both have an income make pragmatic arrangements (for example, one salary is spent on house rent, the other on further expenses).

From an operational perspective, it is obvious that the internal problems mentioned above on the part of employees can impair their performance and lead to a lack of loyalty towards the company.

Mulat (2024) underscores Ethiopia's efforts to attract foreign investors and develop its industrial capacity. However, he states that the current model is leading workers to inadequate living conditions and low pay. The textile sector has established a vulnerable workforce that is susceptible to economic and social shocks and perpetuates a cycle of hardship, he says. Workers' narratives and livelihood strategies are challenging the state's ambition to become an industrialized and middle-income country. Mulat highlights the importance of alternative narratives for the future of African development. He also stresses the need for a minimum wage:

"If Ethiopia needs to become a manufacturing powerhouse, several measures could be taken by the government. Legislating a minimum wage standard would be a significant first step, ensuring a basic level of income for these workers." (Ibid.)

Since the Ethiopian Government offers a great variety of incentives for investors, one could assume that the country could be still attractive even if paying higher wages.

Given what is being discussed as the 'mindset' of employees, further research could help to better understand the different perceptions of employers and employees in the industrial parks. The term 'mindset' refers to the perspective of executives towards their employees. It implies that 'things don't work properly with the women workers because they have the wrong mindset.' However, if we assume that ordinary people are much more intelligent than generally assumed and usually pursue very pragmatic survival strategies, their behavior may be easier to understand. In addition to research, this requires above all more dialogue between the parties involved.

Ethiopia's efforts to transforming the agrarian to an industrial and middle-income country affects not only the economy, but all areas of society, including social, cultural and ecological spheres. The term 'transformation' sounds somewhat neutral, almost smooth. But what does it actually mean? The experiences of the textile workers can give a taste of what lies behind the word. The women join the textile and garment industry mostly to sustain themselves. But they also want to participate in the new consumer opportunities, which are of course attractive. However, they usually end up in a limbo: they leave their modest, often meagre existence and become slum dwellers – uprooted from their local culture but unable to achieve even modest prosperity in the urban centres. Their circumstances often appear to be what Illich called 'modernized poverty': a state characterized by a loss of autonomy over one's own life (see chapter 3.4.2 in this book).

The book also shed light on the rural environments from which most of the women workers surveyed originate. The villagers interviewed emphasize the so-

cial ties and cultural traditions that continue to shape their lives. However, they are aware that their local culture is under threat and will probably disappear. The values of modern, urban lifestyle are increasingly finding their way into the lives of the villagers, which will result in individuals acting in a free-market and competition-oriented manner. The village culture, customs and rules, that once ensured cohesion and local autonomy, are slowly disintegrating. This is accompanied by a gradual “transformation of the modest and autonomous village economy into an economy of neediness and dependence (latently permanent, even if not so desired).” (Gronemeyer et al.)⁶

“Every culture is more or less open to change,”⁷ wrote Bourdieu (2010: 74). However, under certain circumstances⁸ processes of change can disrupt the fundamental norms and values of a culture, leading to a more or less catastrophic dissolution of the cultural whole, according to Bourdieu. In Algeria, he could observe how traditional structures disintegrated in the encounter between a highly industrialized, economically powerful (European) civilization and an economically archaic (Algerian) civilization. (Ibid.)

From an economic perspective, one could say somewhat bluntly that the social and cultural and customs are obstacles to progress because they bind people to their routines; moreover, the subsistence economy allows for a certain degree of independence, which contrasts with the demand for an industrial labor force. This logic also applies when, under current conditions, jobs are needed for the growing young population as small-scale farming can no longer feed everyone or meet the growing demand for money. However, the consequences of this kind of development can be observed worldwide: it is the wiping out of traditional sustainable agricultural and ecological knowledge, the break-up of extended families and communities, and the erosion of ancient spiritual traditions (Black, 2010).

The question arises as to whether future development strategies might not place greater emphasis on coexistence of gainful employment and subsistence-based lifestyles and economies. The remaining forms of informal social security and local food autonomy should be perceived with empathy in order to strengthen them and ultimately ensure their sustainability. How do development experts – how do we – otherwise envision Ethiopia let’s say in 30 years? Prosperity, savings accounts, retirement and a pension at the age of 67?

The demands of the industrialized world of work mean, above all, that people must become isolated individuals and leave behind their strong ties to the community. Global standardization is taking hold all over the world. But we must not

6 Gronemeyer, Fink and Metzger (2015) also described this process based on interviews with small-scale farmers in Malawi.

7 Own translation of the German quote.

8 Bourdieu discussed this in detail in the book cited here, entitled “Algerian Sketches” (2010).

overlook that: despite all crises and conflicts, what applies to Ethiopia maybe applies to all African societies: people's daily survival is still largely guaranteed by informal economic activity, by family support and by a sociality that cannot be measured in monetary terms.

HR managers in textile factories say that they see it as their job to adapt young women to the industrial world of work ('to industrialize the girls'). And once the adaptation process is successful, informal security of communities are weakened. The consequences of advancing individualization can be observed in European societies, where community orientation has been more or less abandoned. Now even the European welfare states erode – particularly as a result of demographic changes. It might take a long time for new impetus for a sustainable community spirit and self-organization to emerge.

The German Federal Government supports the creation of industrial jobs in Ethiopia.⁹ This is being done with a great deal of goodwill. However, most recent crises – the Corona pandemic, disruptions in global supply chains, the ongoing violent conflicts in the country – have once again shown that the clothing industry is vulnerable. It is obvious that in such crisis situations, workers' family networks prove to be more reliable than the company. Ethiopia's labor-intensive textile production appears to be a fragile undertaking, not least because of its dependence on the global market. We are experiencing turbulent times, problems in supply chains, and endangered export routes: deliveries via the Suez Canal or the Red Sea are at risk. Also in recent years, the number of skilled workers entering the industry has dropped drastically: "The drop is attributed to the sector's eroding professional prestige and a tendency among employers to hire less-skilled, lower-paid workers." (F2F News Desk, 2025)

The ecological sustainability of the sector is more than questionable. Fair pay is undermined by cheap wage dumping, but where else could production be even cheaper than in Ethiopia? And let's think further: the global textile industry is facing a wave of automation that will also find its way to Ethiopia. And the tens of thousands of women: it is unlikely that they will still be needed in the long term.

Against this backdrop, it could be important to ask whether there is an opportunity to revive local production in order to achieve more independence from global markets. After all, there was once textile production for local demands, and it still exists to a certain extent. Many of the women workers are eager to learn sewing as a profession. They aspire to have their own sewing machine in order to work independently, even if it is in the village with their family. And couldn't that

9 The support provided by the German Federal Government is implemented by the "Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)" in Ethiopia, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/128196.html>.

be a good thing as one strand of future development, provided that local markets are not flooded with cheap goods from China or Europe?

Ethiopia has achieved remarkable progress, which can be measured above all in terms of infrastructure expansion in rural areas, increased agricultural productivity and years of robust economic growth. Nevertheless, Ethiopia and other African countries with positive growth rates are facing a persistent increase in poverty. As measured by the latest Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (2025), material deprivation has climbed to its highest average level of the past 25 years since the organization began tracking poverty trends in Africa. The research network points out that increasing corruption could play a role in the resurgence of poverty. Population growth is also often cited as a factor that is undermining achieved successes. However, it should be added that the transformation of agriculture may also contribute to an increase in poverty, at least as far as subsistence farmers are concerned.

Growing poverty is one side of African reality. The other side shows a continent with a young population and rich in resources that will play a significant role in future development. European policy, for example, is responding to the growing importance of the African continent in a multipolar world. The new European policy on Africa reflects a course characterized by a recalibrated realism under changed geopolitical conditions:

"In the aftermath of decolonization, Europe's engagement with Africa was largely shaped by a developmental ethos rooted in normative ideals – shared values, democracy promotion, and human rights. For decades, European policy focused on capacity-building and humanitarian aid while avoiding direct political or military entanglements. These efforts included funding for rural electrification, water and sanitation projects, support for civil society, and institutional reform." (Aguilar, 2025)

However, increasing geopolitical tensions, changing migration patterns, growing resource dependencies and the waning influence of former colonial powers have necessitated a strategic realignment of Western countries. The new EU-Africa policy wants to combine "normative commitments with a more transactional approach aimed at safeguarding its interests in a multipolar world" (ibid.). Germany recently reaffirmed its commitment to supporting the Pan-African Free Trade Zone and measures to strengthen trade relations. The stated goal is to overcome neo-colonial logic of exploitation and generate local value creation so that local partners also benefit. At the same time, it says that development cooperation and Germany's own economic interests should be more closely aligned in future. According to political officials, values and interests are not contradictory. "The new federal government not only recognizes Africa's geopolitical importance, but is

also committed to promoting economic prospects and its own economic interests on the continent,¹⁰ declares the chief executive of the German-African Business Association (Afrika-Verein der deutschen Wirtschaft e.V., 2025).

It remains to be seen what implications the reorientation of EU-Africa policy could have for Ethiopia's textile industry. At the same time, the question of where improvements in the living conditions of textile workers and people in Ethiopia could come from should not be considered exclusively at the level of development planning. Hope for change could also lie in the inherent strengths and creativity of the people themselves. That was Illich's view – and literally the only thing he trusted. The outstanding thinker and critic of the belief in progress had more faith in ordinary people's ability to shape their own lives than in top-down approaches prescribed by experts. Illich firmly believed “in the creativity, in the surprising inventiveness of people” (Cayley, 1992: 111). The worldview of the simple man, the peasant, the slum-dweller, was the anchor point of his thinking throughout his entire life, and he emphasized: “I continue to hope in them.” (Ibid.)

And what about the textile enterprises? In the event the textile industry has a long-term future in Ethiopia, companies will probably succeed in gaining acceptance among workers for the requirements of industrial employment and gradually stabilizing the workforce. The introduction of a minimum wage by the state could make an important contribution to this – if it does not contribute to companies pulling out of Ethiopia. In order to improve the unstable work situation, more attention should be paid to ‘social sustainability’ of the sector in general.

However, it should not be overlooked that the ‘work ethic’ demanded by companies does, in a sense, indeed conflict with local Ethiopian attitudes. The subject was touched upon in this book. In this sense, Hochleithner (2024) made an ironic comment:

“Development work in Africa often seems difficult and a significant number of projects fail – but why? Is it because of the ‘unwillingness’ of those being developed? Their ‘laziness’, their lack of interest in developing a ‘proper work ethic’?”¹¹

He refers to the #Khomani, who live on the edge of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa and officially belong to the San ethnic group. Uprooted from their traditional livelihoods, the #Khomani had nothing but to sell their labor force. Today, they are partly employed in museums or in the tourism industry. However, the #Khomani tend to “show up late or not at all for work, or leave early or for no apparent reason, and generally display no ‘work ethic’.” (Ibid.) This is, according to Hochleithner, precisely where the “crux of Western (mis)interpretation and the

10 Own translation of the German quote.

11 Own translation of the German quote.

naturalization of European ideas' lies." His conclusion: "Work is not a universal concept!" (Ibid.)¹²

However, regarding the female (or male) factory workers in Ethiopia, culturally different attitudes towards work cannot hide the fact that these people show tremendous dedication: their everyday life consists of a six-day week in the factory. Their precarious situation is obvious, not least because they are often willing to change employers for a few birr more in salary. They are very keen not to lose their monthly attendance bonus. Many of them study at a college alongside their full-time jobs at the factory. They live in church and social communities. They cook and take care of their households and possibly also of their children. They respect festivals and rituals that play an important role in their lives. For the time being, this is not changing. But pragmatism creeps in: with regard to funerals, shorter periods of attendance are sometimes negotiated with families, and working women are occasionally asked to return to their families only on major holidays. This shows an act of destruction and singularization. During the coronavirus crisis, however, it has become clear that families are a vital safety net for the workers. If that were to disappear, the loss would be great. There is no welfare state to catch people when they fall. Companies are not reliable partners for the women. This book can only end with one conclusion: the women workers in Ethiopia's textile industry represent a strong and committed way of life!

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(Web sources: last accessed on 25.5.2025)

