‘Above the Government’: The Political Legacy of an International Development Project in Ethiopia

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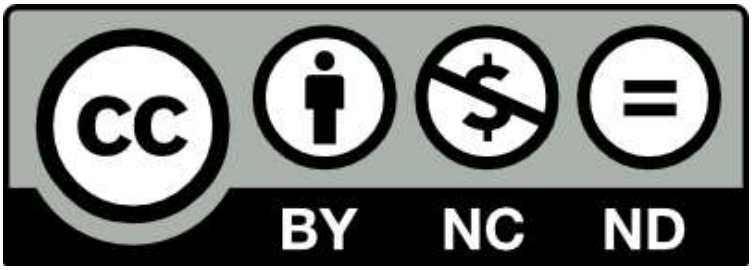

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Abstract

There is growing concern that international aid may be bolstering authoritarian regimes, but the precise means through which aid might have this effect remain underexplored. This thesis provides insight into this question through a case study of the Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP), implemented by the NGO Menschen für Menschen (MfM) between 1988-2009 in Ethiopia's Amhara region. This is a project which according to prevailing wisdom ought to have strengthened the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime, because EPRDF had firm control of development resources in the country, and because MfM aligned itself closely to the regime, avoided advocacy, and built infrastructure which it transferred to officials. However, I found that the project had weakened acceptance of the regime in the area. Local residents had come to see MfM as a superior source of development compared with the regime – as 'above the government'. This fundamentally delegitimated the regime's claim to be delivering development. The thesis develops a novel conceptual framework, revised in the light of the empirical material, which theorises three mechanisms through which projects influence regime political dominance: building structures, distributing resources, and legitimation practices. It also makes a methodological contribution, using an ethnographic-historical approach which reveals aspects of development projects which have seldom been identified in other studies. The case suggests the need for a significant rethinking of the relationships between aid and authoritarianism. It also has implications for research on Ethiopian politics, NGOs in authoritarian regimes, and foreign aid's effects on government legitimacy.

Acknowledgements

This thesis has been long in the making. Since I started to work for the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) in 2003, I have been intrigued and concerned by the unintended consequences of development aid projects, including especially those that relate to local politics. During the intervening time, whenever I have been involved in managing development projects and programmes, I have wondered about the kinds of political effects they might be having, for good or bad, but never had the chance to investigate them. Even before I started my studies, however, I was convinced that the best way to understand what was really happening in any aid project was to listen to the people who were supposed to benefit from it. Also, I have always had a hunch that seeing aid in historical context was likely to be a good way of gaining a different perspective on it – a perspective from outside the sometimes-blinkered view of the aid bureaucrat that I had been trained to adopt.

My academic journey dates back to my time as a Master's student at LSE in 2002-03, and my first thanks go to John Harriss, then head of the Development Studies Institute, who identified me as the kind of person who might enjoy a PhD, which as he put it involved learning 'more and more about less and less'. In 2011, a few years after starting at DFID, I reconnected with academia when I attended a small workshop on the colonial history of development at the University of York. There I met Mike Jennings, who offered very helpful advice both at the time and later when I was debating whether to start a PhD. A brief interlude studying for a second Master's in Historical Research at Birkbeck, University of London in 2011-12 (which I sadly could not complete) was formative for me

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The PhD itself I have 'only' been doing for about a decade (!), having started in 2017. I have been extremely lucky to have had two such insightful, helpful, dedicated and compassionate supervisors in Jonathan Fisher and Claire Mcloughlin. They have been a constant source of good advice, support and wisdom on the PhD process and beyond. I would also like to thank Nick Lemay-Hebert, who was also an excellent co-supervisor for the first year of the PhD before his place was taken by Claire. Nic Cheeseman has been almost something like a third supervisor, providing really helpful and formative contributions at various points and also helping me to connect my day job with the PhD. Also at Birmingham, I would like to thank Sameen Ali, Emily Scott, Brock Bersaglio, David Hudson and Benedetta Rossi (now at UCL) for much helpful advice and support.

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In Merhabete itself, there are too many people to thank by name as so many people were so generous with their time. In addition to talking to me in interviews, many people welcomed me hospitably into their homes, and some went out of their way to help by introducing me to others or even sometimes accompanying me to other parts of the district. This thesis is founded on their generosity, wisdom and insight. I would specifically like to mention my gratitude to the Merhabete *wereda* administration for allowing me to work in the district and facilitating access to their records.

I have written the PhD while working for DFID and since 2020, the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). I am very grateful to successive line managers, including Aislin Baker, Sonya Maldar and Paul Edwards, for their interest, encouragement and support. I am grateful to FCDO for granting me study leave to write up the thesis and to my team members who have covered for me during my frequent

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I am lucky to have good friends, some of whom have written PhDs and have been very generous with their advice about the process. Alicia Altorfer-Ong, a fellow LSE student, was an early source of inspiration for PhD writing on the history of development. Alexander Morrisson, together with Beatrice Penati, provided really helpful advice about the historian's craft. My fellow Ethiopia-based PhD buddies, Ursula Trübswasser and Daisy Banerjee, offered companionship, mutual encouragement and a place to share frustrations which was much needed. James Galloway, together with my brothers Rupert and Patrick, have always been there for me, have cheered me up on many occasions and have carried me through some tough times.

My children, Clara, Helena, Conrad and Romy have been hearing me repeat the letters P, H and D for a long time – for some of them, since before they learned the alphabet. I would like to thank them for their patience with me as I have been away writing, their questions about what I am doing and why, their belief in me and their encouragement. Finally, my wife Julia has been a constant source of support in countless ways. Having written a PhD herself, she provided vital advice on the structure and argument of the thesis. Julia was the main funder of this PhD and it was thanks to her that we moved to Ethiopia and I could take time off work to start this whole journey. Most importantly, she has given me her unconditional love and support. This thesis is dedicated to her, and to our children.

Note

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Democracy across the world is under threat. In a wide range of different contexts, human rights and democratic freedoms are being eroded. Quantitative measures point to a decline in democracy and a rise in authoritarianism globally. For example, Freedom House recorded in 2025 that global freedom had declined for the 19th consecutive year (Freedom House, 2025). The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2024 suggests that only 6.6% of people currently live in a 'full democracy' (EIU, 2025). The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project reports that 45 countries were autocratising and only 19 democratizing in 2024, concluding 'the outlook on the world at the end of 2024 is worse than in the last 25 years' (Nord et al., 2025: 840). Statistics on rising authoritarianism can seem abstract, but they reflect very real problems, including manipulation of elections, reduced freedom of expression, surveillance, repression of protests, together with harassment, arrests and killings of opposition figures, journalists and others.

Given the trends of increasing authoritarianism, scholars and policy makers have been asking questions about the role played by international development aid in either supporting democracy or entrenching authoritarian rule. In the early years of the century, scholars had hoped that aid might promote democracy, but the results of their enquiries were largely inconclusive (see for example Knack, 2004; Bermeo, 2011; Kersting and Kilby, 2014; Resnick and van de Walle, 2013). The most recent summary of this literature finds that on balance, aid specifically targeted at promoting democracy may have some

positive impact on democratisation, but this is not clear for general development aid (Gisselquist et al., 2021).

More recently, arguments that aid might be bolstering authoritarian regimes have been more prominent. A growing number of studies have suggested that aid is keeping authoritarian regimes in power (see for example Cheeseman and Desrosiers, 2023; Baissa and Cammett, 2022; Hamid, 2022; Murtazashvili, 2022; von Billerbeck and Tansey, 2019; Hagmann and Reyntjens, 2016). Aid provided by or through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) seems not to be exempt from these effects, with a number of studies claiming that these can be co-opted by regimes and play a role in legitimating them (Toepler et al., 2020; Heiss, 2019; Lorch and Bunk, 2017; see also Jennings, 2008). Whilst most research has focused on aid from democracies, increasing amounts of aid are also being provided by authoritarian regimes themselves, and this is generally considered even more likely to be reinforcing authoritarianism (Yilmaz and Eliküçük Yıldırım, 2020; Kästner, 2019; Tansey, 2016b).

The question of whether and how aid might bolster authoritarianism is important for policy makers as well as scholars. In countries where governments remain committed to democratic norms, officials want to ensure that their aid projects and programmes do not inadvertently lend support to autocrats. Officials in multilateral development agencies share similar concerns. These topics have been debated at donor groupings such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2022). Those who work in international NGOs (INGOs) are also keen to ensure that their work does not reinforce authoritarian rule. There is therefore an interest in understanding which factors or conditions might make aid more or less likely to support authoritarianism. For example,

are certain types or modalities of aid more or less likely to bolster authoritarian rulers? Is aid provided through NGOs less susceptible to supporting regimes than state-to-state aid? Can some forms of aid be politically neutral, avoiding any effects on either authoritarianism or democracy? How do we even know the different effects of particular kinds of aid on authoritarian rule in specific contexts?

In order to answer these questions, we need to understand the detailed mechanisms through which aid projects and programmes might support authoritarian rule. Yet existing research has provided limited insight into this issue. Much of the literature on aid and authoritarianism has concentrated on explaining *why* donors have continued to provide aid to authoritarian regimes, even when human rights are abused, and how regimes themselves have persuaded donors to continue their support (Simpson, 2024; Hagmann and Reyntjens, 2016; Brown, 2011; Fisher, 2014; Fisher and Anderson, 2015; Brown and Fisher, 2020). These accounts, with few exceptions, do not delve into the detailed processes by which aid is understood to underwrite authoritarian rule, regarding the effect as largely given.

Whilst there are studies which have investigated causal connections between aid and authoritarianism, these tend to focus on single factors. For example some cross-national, quantitative studies have focused on the role of patronage (such as Ahmed, 2012; Baissa and Cammett, 2022). There are also detailed case studies of individual types of development intervention which have bolstered authoritarian rule, such as security force assistance (Rolandsen et al., 2021; Anderson and Fisher, 2016) and decentralisation initiatives (Chinigò, 2014; Emmenegger et al., 2011). Few studies have attempted a more thorough theorisation – or a more detailed empirical exploration – of how aid might be

linked to authoritarian rule through a variety of different mechanisms. Perhaps the closest example is von Billerbeck et al.'s *United Nations Peacekeeping and the Politics of Authoritarianism* (2025), which analyses two different mechanisms linking international interventions to authoritarianism, but this focuses on peacekeeping operations rather than development aid.

The literature on NGOs and authoritarianism includes some excellent studies theorising how NGOs can interact with and legitimate authoritarian regimes (Lorch and Bunk, 2017; Lewis, 2013). Nonetheless, much of this literature has concentrated on domestic rather than international NGOs, with a particular focus on the space that they have or do not have to carry out their operations in authoritarian contexts (Toepler et al., 2020; Heiss, 2019; Poppe and Wolff, 2017; Dupuy et al., 2016). There is comparatively less focus on the mechanisms linking NGO development projects to authoritarian rule, and particularly the possibility that there may be multiple mechanisms providing such a link. Lorch and Bunk's influential article, for example, concentrates only on legitimation and not on how NGOs might affect authoritarian rule in other ways, such as their distribution of resources (Lorch and Bunk, 2017). Meanwhile, other studies continue to focus on the question of whether NGOs may be supporting democracy, rather than authoritarianism (Moldavanova et al., 2023; Herrold and AbouAssi, 2023).

In addition to its relatively weak theorisation of the relationships between international development aid and authoritarian rule, the existing literature devotes little attention to the perspectives and understandings of citizens themselves in aid-recipient countries. This is a major omission, because they are a rich potential source of wisdom on the effects of development projects and programmes. Citizens' perspectives are important to hear in

their own right, but can also offer insights into the relationships between governments, citizens and development agencies in authoritarian states which are not available through other data. A further important blind spot of existing studies is that they largely conceive of the effects of aid as short-term, ignoring the fact that projects can have political reverberations for years or even decades after they close. The material and ideational legacies of development projects – their 'ruins' and 'afterlives' – have been the subject of a nascent literature (see Gez et al., 2022; Gez, 2021; Schler and Gez, 2018; see also Anand et al., 2018), but this has not yet been integrated with studies of aid and authoritarianism.

This thesis addresses these omissions and sheds new light on the question of how development aid impacts on authoritarian rule over the long term. It does so both theoretically and empirically. The thesis develops a conceptual framework based on existing literature which suggests three mechanisms by which development projects can impact on authoritarian regimes' political dominance:[1] building structures, distributing resources, and legitimating their work. It then tests this framework by applying it to an ethnographic-historical case study of an international development project, reviewed ten years after it closed, through methods which are grounded on the perspectives of people who lived through it. The case challenges the existing understandings of the relationship between aid and authoritarianism developed in the conceptual framework. It presents a puzzle: a project which, according to prevailing thinking, ought to have strengthened authoritarian rule in a particular local context, but in fact significantly weakened it. The

[1] Political dominance is defined as a situation where people publicly support or at least acquiesce in a regime's long-term rule. A fuller discussion of the concept is provided below.

case highlights important limitations in existing understandings of how development interventions interact with authoritarianism. These are explored throughout the thesis and brought together in a revised analysis of the conceptual framework. Before highlighting these limitations, I first introduce the case and what made it so puzzling.

The Merhabete project and why it matters

The Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP) was implemented by the German-Austrian-Swiss NGO Menschen für Menschen (MfM, 'People for People') in Merhabete *wereda* (district) of Amhara region, Ethiopia, between 1988-2009. It was an example of an 'integrated rural development project' – a type of project which involved a wide range of different development activities at the same time in a relatively restricted geographical area, in this case a district of about 130,000 people. This was a popular modality with NGOs as well as bilateral and multilateral donors from the 1970s onwards, and enjoyed a brief resurgence again in the early 2000s under Jeffrey Sachs' Millennium Villages Project (Cohen, 1980; Cohen, 1987; World Bank, 1988; Barnett, 2018).

Over its two decades of implementation, the MIRDP carried out a wide range of different activities in Merhabete district, including construction of roads, school blocks, water points, clinics, irrigation works, and a hospital; agricultural extension, including soil and water conservation activities; a women's savings and credit scheme; scholarships for talented school children, and a campaign against female genital mutilation. It was implemented direct, without intermediaries: during implementation, over 100 staff were working directly for MfM in Merhabete *wereda*, with indirect or casual employees (such as construction workers) perhaps numbering into the thousands. According to the final

evaluation of the MIRDP, MfM invested a total of 31.1 million Euro in Merhabete between 1988 and 2007, an average of 1.6 million Euro per year.[2] According to the 2009 evaluation, the MIRDP's budget was 'more than 10 times of the district government budget.'[3] Whether it was quite this large throughout implementation was unclear, although it was evidently a major investment locally. The MIRDP was one of several integrated rural development projects for MfM; in 2007, it was running ten such projects in Ethiopia with a total annual spend of 21.8 million Euro.[4]

Based on existing literature on aid and authoritarianism, this is the kind of international development project which one would expect to be likely to strengthen a regime's political dominance. Although there has been little explicit theorisation of how development projects might strengthen authoritarian rule, previous studies suggest that projects should strengthen regimes where those regimes exercise strong control over development resources, which allows them to integrate these resources into patronage networks. Existing studies also suggest that projects should strengthen regimes where development agencies align their activities and communications strongly with regimes, reinforcing regimes' legitimacy and ensuring project activities are closely integrated into regime development plans, which often have political objectives.

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[2] MfM Addis Ababa Archives. KDA Management Consultancy, 'Menschen Fuer Menschen Foundation (MFMF): Impact Assessment of Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP), October 2009', 37.

[3] MfM Addis Ababa Archives. KDA Management Consultancy, 'Menschen Fuer Menschen Foundation (MFMF): Impact Assessment of Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP), October 2009', 137.

[4] Menschen für Menschen Austria, Jahresbericht [Annual Report] 2007.

At first glance at least, the MIRDP fully met these criteria. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front regime (EPRDF, 1991-2019) is widely seen as having exerted strong control over development resources in the country, including those of NGO projects (Lavers, 2024; Cheeseman and Desrosiers, 2023; Chinigò, 2022). Menschen für Menschen, amongst NGOs and other development agencies operating in Ethiopia during this period, was one of the most closely aligned to the EPRDF regime. Its head, Karlheinz Böhm (1928-2014), a film actor famous in the German-speaking world, developed close relations with senior regime figures, appeared publicly alongside Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, was celebrated with a statue in a prominent location in the capital Addis Ababa, and was honoured with several documentaries on national television by the state broadcaster EBC – honours which far exceeded those granted to any other NGO in the country. Although the regime was generally highly sceptical about NGOs, MfM was referred to as 'responsible', part of the its fight against poverty.

Looking more specifically at the MIRDP, it did not involve advocacy work, and even provided few services to citizens independently from the state. Instead, the majority of its resources were spent on building school blocks, health clinics, a hospital and other structures, which were transferred to the government after their construction. It seemed that these would likely bolster the regime's strategy of extending its reach across the country and into previously remote areas. Compared to other development projects even within Ethiopia, the MIRDP seemed especially likely to have strengthened the regime's political dominance.

Despite this, I found that ten years after the MIRDP closed, it had significantly weakened regime dominance locally. Although the infrastructure it built did indeed

enhance the regime's reach across the *wereda*, when I spoke to people about the project, they contrasted the beneficence of MfM with what they saw as regime neglect. In multiple conversations, people listed the various structures built by the MIRDP, praising the NGO and Böhm personally, but complaining that since the NGO had left the area, the regime had done 'nothing'. They argued that 'we don't have any government here in Merhabete'[5], and that 'MfM has raised awareness of what the government should have done.'[6] Many were in awe of MfM; a local government official told me the NGO was 'above the government' (*ke mengist belay*).[7]

Through further conversations, I found that the project had had tangible negative political consequences for the regime. During the contested Ethiopian elections of 2005, officials had attempted to claim credit for the work of MfM but this had been rejected by people in the area. In response, they had said they wanted to vote for Böhm, as he had provided so much infrastructure for the district. The project was used as a reference point for the regime's critics, as it suggested what a developmental government might have looked like. This had fundamentally delegitimated one of the regime's core legitimating narratives, the claim that it was 'bringing development', and weakened local acceptance of EPRDF rule. Even when I visited the district ten years after the project closed, people still referred to the project to demonstrate what they saw as the regime's neglect.

In exploring the reasons why this happened, I found the key dynamic was that MfM had become seen as the origin or source of development, rather than EPRDF. It was

[5] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 April 2019.

[6] Interview, business owner and former model farmer, 14 November 2019.

[7] Interview, *kebele* official, formerly chairperson of *kebele* development committee, 2 May 2019.

understood as distinct from, and even superior to, the regime. Although MfM staff, including Böhm himself, generally communicated a strong sense of partnership with the regime, on closer inspection, they found ways of distinguishing their work from that of the government. One example was MfM's insistence that it was 'non-political' – a mantra which was repeated on all quarterly reports and mentioned to me in many interviews. MfM's identity as non-political was used to draw a distinction between government development efforts (characterised as contaminated with political ends) and those of MfM (described as being purely about development). Another example was the way Böhm presented himself during his frequent visits to the district. These resonated locally because they both drew on existing registers and understandings of authority, but also conveyed a strong sense that Böhm was different. All this was possible at the same time as the NGO maintained close alignment and collaboration with the regime.

Another critical factor underpinning this outcome was the long-term role of former MfM staff and other beneficiaries. The project provided employment for many people from the local area, several of whom were educated and had previously worked for the previous Derg regime (1974-1991). Some of these people had been ostracised by EPRDF and were not predisposed to support the new government. Whilst the regime had control of many project resources, it had limited control over distribution of agricultural inputs and staff salaries. After project closure, some staff and other beneficiaries used resources they received under the project to develop new livelihoods, for example as shop owners or grain traders. This made them less dependent on resources from the regime and more willing to repeat narratives about MfM being more effective. Many of these people also felt a personal debt of gratitude to MfM and Karlheinz Böhm, which meant they were less

likely to credit the regime for bringing development to the area. They therefore played an important role in disseminating narratives that situated MfM as above the government.

The case suggests the need for a significant rethinking of the links between aid and authoritarianism. Firstly, it reminds us that the long-term effects of aid in authoritarian regimes can be complex and difficult to ascertain. The fact that aid is provided to a country with an authoritarian regime does not automatically entrench that regime's hold on power domestically, counter to the suggestions of some of the existing literature. The case of the MIRDP shows that even aid agencies which are closely aligned to regimes and appear to be strengthening them may in fact be weakening their political dominance. Also, regimes which appear to be in control of development resources may in fact have less control than it first appears. In much of the literature on Ethiopian politics, for example, the impression is that the EPRDF regime exerted near full control of donor and NGO development initiatives (see for example Lavers, 2024; Chinigò, 2022; Fantini and Puddu, 2016; Emmenegger et al., 2011) – but this case demonstrates that that control was not complete.

Secondly, the case demonstrates that aid initiatives can simultaneously strengthen and weaken different aspects of authoritarian rule. Through building structures such as schools, clinics, and roads across the district, the MIRDP strengthened the EPRDF regime's reach, enabling greater presence of state officials and potentially facilitating regime dominance through violent coercion and distribution of state resources to regime allies. However, at the same time, it weakened public acceptance of the regime by being seen to demonstrate its failure to deliver development.

Thirdly, the case shows that aid's effects on authoritarian rule are not limited to either supporting authoritarianism or supporting democracy. The MIRDP demonstrates that development projects can weaken support for authoritarian regimes without necessarily promoting more democratic forms of governance. People wanted to vote for Böhm not because he stood for a more inclusive, transparent or accountable government, but because he and MfM had more effectively delivered developmental improvements than the EPRDF regime.

Fourthly, the case demonstrates that authoritarian regimes which stake their legitimacy on their ability to deliver development face certain risks, and that development schemes implemented by external agencies have a potential to expose regimes to critiques that they are not doing enough for their citizens. The circumstances in which this might occur are explored throughout the thesis. These findings have the potential to enrich future studies on aid and authoritarianism. They also have implications for policy makers in development agencies, suggesting the need for more close attention to the impacts of aid initiatives on authoritarian rule.

In addition to its implications for research on aid and authoritarianism, the thesis also makes significant contributions to other literatures. In particular, it makes an important contribution to debates on the links between foreign aid and state or government legitimacy. There is a significant and growing literature on this topic, much of which is quantitative and has tended to find that aid has either no effect or modestly improves citizens' assessments of their governments (see for example Blair and Roessler, 2021; Blair and Winters, 2020; Dietrich et al., 2018; Winters et al., 2018; DiLorenzo, 2018; Dietrich and Winters, 2015). A key question in these debates is whether and how

governments can claim credit for development schemes implemented by external actors. Many authors find that that governments succeed in claiming such credit, either because people have low expectations of the state or regime, or because they understand the external agency as operating under its authority or control (Springman, 2022; Blair and Roessler, 2021; Baldwin and Winters, 2023; Dietrich et al., 2018; Brass, 2016).

By contrast, this thesis presents a case where the regime did not manage to claim credit for the work of an external agency, and where people did not see it as operating under regime control. In Merhabete, people developed quasi-patrimonial ties with an international development agency, even though it operated in close coordination with the regime. Karlheinz Böhm himself, as a personalised patron, played a significant role forging these ties in the case here, but I will argue that this was not necessarily decisive, and that similar effects may be found in projects without individual figureheads. The thesis suggests the need for further contextualised exploration of processes by which people give, or refuse to give, credit to governments for the work of NGOs and aid donors – including how these are dependent on local understandings of the role of government and how development agencies present their own work.

Finally, the thesis makes an important methodological contribution. In both the literatures on aid and authoritarianism, and on aid and government legitimacy, there is a relative lack of in-depth accounts which explore the perspectives and understandings of local residents in the areas where aid projects are implemented. Historical accounts, which look at the effects of projects several years after they close, are also scarce. This thesis demonstrates the critical importance of such approaches. It shows how prevailing thinking may lead us to expect certain effects of development projects, whereas

ethnographic and historical research methods can demonstrate that the effects are quite different. Through taking time to talk to local residents, learning how they see development projects, and reviewing how effects play out not just during implementation but in their long afterlives, we can significantly deepen our understanding of the political legacies of development aid, whether in authoritarian, hybrid, or democratic contexts.

Research question and key concepts

In setting out to understand the ways in which international aid impacts on authoritarian rule, I made a number of strategic choices about how to frame the research, the concepts to employ, and the most suitable research design and methods to use. The research question for the thesis encapsulates these choices. It is set out below and in what follows I explain the decisions I took and the reasons for framing the thesis in this way.

> Research Question: Through what mechanisms can international development projects influence authoritarian regimes' political dominance over the long term?

The first strategic choice was to focus on *authoritarian regimes* and their *political dominance*. My use of the terms 'regime', 'government' and 'state' requires a brief explanation. The thesis follows Dan Slater and Sofia Fenner in seeing states and governments in authoritarian contexts as 'analytically distinct' but 'empirically intertwined' (Slater and Fenner, 2011: 16). Slater and Fenner distinguish between states and

governments whilst stressing their linkages: the state is ‘a kind of machinery that is linked but not reducible to the actors [i.e. a government or regime] who operate it’ (ibid.).

In authoritarian contexts, the dividing line between government and state is often especially blurred. Senior actors in the government can instruct state officials to carry out tasks that would not be permitted in many democratic contexts, such as campaigning for the ruling party during elections, or intimidation of political rivals (Hassan, 2020; Slater and Fenner, 2011). In Ethiopia specifically, this blurring is further heightened by the fact that in Amharic, the word *mengist* is used to mean both government and state. In this thesis, I use the term ‘regime’ to describe a governing party and its wider formal and informal influence over state structures. The term ‘regime’ is used rather than either ‘party’ or ‘government’ to reflect the greater influence that governing parties have over the state in authoritarian contexts. Despite this, I maintain a distinction between the regime and the state; this reflects the fact that periodically regimes do change in authoritarian contexts, leaving behind state structures which are taken over by a new government.

I use the term ‘political dominance’ to refer to a situation where people publicly support or at least acquiesce in a regime’s long-term rule. This may be either because they believe it to be legitimate, or due to a calculation of self-interest (for example, fear of violent coercion, or hope of receiving benefits), or both. The concept of political dominance incorporates legitimacy, which I understand broadly as social acceptance, as whatever people believe to be legitimate, without normative judgements about what *should* be considered legitimate (Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018; Acero and Thomson, 2021). However, political dominance also goes beyond legitimacy. A regime’s dominance is a function not only of people’s genuine acceptance of its rule, their true belief in its

legitimacy, but also their calculations about whether to support, oppose or acquiesce in its rule based on the benefits and risks of doing so. This definition of political dominance is my own, but draws on recent work by Tom Goodfellow and David Jackman (2023a).

Regimes' dominance is not an on-off concept; it exists on a spectrum. For example, where a regime has weak political dominance, it would face large-scale public opposition, vocal protests and potentially armed resistance. On the other extreme, where a regime has strong political dominance, people would largely believe it to be actually legitimate, with few if any acts of (even covert) resistance. There are many scenarios in the middle, including for example where many people believe a regime to be illegitimate but are unwilling to protest publicly, instead engaging in strategies such as evasion and false compliance, characterised by James Scott as 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985). Regimes can have different degrees of dominance among different groups and populations, and this can change over time. In addition, dominance is related to the presence or absence of other powerful social groups who can challenge the regime.

The concept of political dominance is valuable because it provides a way of assessing a regime's hold on power amongst the general population that is more comprehensive than either the concept of 'authoritarian stability', which captures only the presence or absence of public resistance to the regime, or legitimacy, which focuses on people's internal beliefs. Using the concept of political dominance, we can assess situations where a regime is widely perceived as illegitimate but is still apparently stable: for example, it may enjoy relative dominance due to fear of repression or the absence of rival elites. Political dominance is also preferred to 'authoritarian durability', which is used in many quantitative studies, and measures the actual length of time a regime remains in power.

Durability cannot be assessed until a regime loses power and is therefore less relevant to studies where a regime remains in place. The relationship between dominance and durability is a complex one. Regimes may have weak dominance and still remain in power for many years, but nonetheless if a regime's dominance is weakened, this makes it *more likely* that it will be contested or replaced in the future.

Some readers may object to the idea that development aid will impact on regimes' political dominance at all. If there is no basis to assume that projects will regularly have effects on political dominance, the research question could be seen as deterministic. There are two arguments that might be put forward by readers who take this position. Firstly, it might be argued that regimes' key strategies for dominance, including especially violent coercion, are unlikely to be affected by development aid. In response to this I would argue that aid can indeed contribute to violent coercion, for example through providing fungible budgetary transfers, and by building structures that are used by armies and police forces. Even if it does not contribute to violent coercion, aid can affect regimes' other strategies for dominance, such as the provision of patronage and the strengthening of legitimating narratives. Chapter 3 provides more detail on regimes' strategies for dominance and how aid projects can contribute to these.

Secondly, critics might argue that the effects and significance of development aid on regimes' political dominance are likely to vary considerably over space and time, and that we should not expect them to be sufficiently regular to be discernible through research. In response, I would argue that the fact that projects introduce external resources, people and ideas into aid-recipient contexts makes them highly likely to influence regimes' dominance – including because regimes will seek to capture projects' resources, and

because development is central to the legitimacy claims of many regimes. The common features of many aid projects give us grounds to assume that they will have effects that are not simply random and that these will be replicated in some form from one project to another – even though effects will of course vary according to the nature of each project and the context in which it is implemented.

The second choice made in framing the thesis was to focus the analysis on international development *projects*. Although the thesis seeks to contribute to debates about international aid in general, it does so through a detailed case study of a development project. This decision was taken as a means of allowing more in-depth consideration of the development business and its political effects. Focusing analysis at the level of a development project in a particular geographical locality provided a degree of granularity about effects that would not have been possible in a study focused on the effects of aid in general, for example at the national level, or even in an analysis of a large-scale sector development programme in the education or health sector. Focusing on a project allowed me to dig deep into its unintended consequences, which are often very difficult to detect (Jabeen, 2016; Bamberger et al., 2016; Koch, 2023). The restricted geographic focus meant that I had more time to understand how people in the district of implementation understood the project. It also allowed me to explore how exactly it had operated, including the specific resources it distributed and the way its staff had legitimated their work. This detail was vital in identifying and refining my understanding of the mechanisms which link aid to authoritarian rule (on which more below).

An international development project is a good subject for researching the political effects of development aid because each project can potentially resemble a microcosm

of the development business as a whole. Projects are funded and operated by a wide variety of different actors with different objectives and resources, including states, international organisations, private companies, philanthropic foundations, and NGOs. Nonetheless, all international – that is, externally-funded – projects involve certain key features, including the introduction of external people, money and ideas into a particular locality, with the intention of achieving specific targets, over a limited period of time.[8] This makes them sites of cooperation and/or contestation between governments and the external agencies which direct them. Analysing the effects of a development project in a particular locality therefore provides insights which can apply to aid as a whole, as aid in general involves the introduction of money, people and ideas into an aid-recipient country. Of course, focusing analysis at the project level does make certain aspects of aid's political effects out of scope, such as the cumulative effects of multiple aid programmes on a particular ministry or agency over time. But I judged that the benefits of situating the analysis at project level were great enough to outweigh these downsides.

In many cases projects are delivered through intermediaries, sometimes in delivery chains which involve multiple links. For example, a bilateral donor may channel funding through a private company, which in turn issues grants or sub-contracts to local NGOs. This is an important reminder that although NGOs are generally analysed separately from donors in much of the literature – for good reasons – when national or local NGOs

[8] In this light, projects are sometimes referred to in other studies as 'interventions', particularly when authors want to emphasise the continuity between development projects and larger international peacebuilding interventions. Whilst there are many similarities, I choose to use the term 'project' rather than 'intervention', firstly because it is a more widely used term, and secondly because in many cases projects are closely negotiated with governments in host countries and should not be seen as outside the jurisdiction of these governments.

implement projects on behalf of donors or INGOs, they become part of the ‘big tent’ of international aid. However, to avoid confusion, I will use the term ‘international development agencies’ (sometimes shortened to ‘development agencies’) to refer to *international* agencies which fund and implement development projects, including donors and INGOs, but not local or national NGOs.

Finally, in focusing the analysis on development projects, I did not explicitly consider state-to-state resource transfers such as direct budget support. The literature on aid and authoritarianism refers to various forms of aid, but budget support is (often implicitly) a particular concern. It is generally understood that the modality of budget support allows authoritarian regimes more discretion to use aid for purposes such as repression of opposition or distribution of patronage, and that this is harder (though not impossible) when aid is provided outside of state systems. This thinking has influenced donors themselves, who in recent years have moved away from budget support and diverted more aid into specific development projects and programmes.

Besides the argument that budget support represents a relatively small proportion of contemporary aid (generally around 10-13% according to Fardoust et al., 2023), I would argue that it is not completely exempt from the effects discussed in this thesis. Like other aid modalities, it is also ‘projectized’ by donors, has particular start and end dates, quantified targets, and involves the introduction of people and ideas from outside. The provision or withdrawal of budget support can potentially have significant impacts not only on patronage but on the way that regimes are perceived by their citizens. Where donors loudly and publicly criticise regimes, this may well impact negatively on these regimes’ dominance. Whilst budget support is generally more likely to entrench authoritarian

regimes than much project-based aid, thinking about aid's effects through the prism of projects can yield insights which also apply to budget support and larger aid programmes.

A third important choice was to focus the thesis on *mechanisms* linking projects to regimes' political dominance. The purpose of this study is to develop understanding of causal links that are relatively poorly understood at present, as a contribution to theory-building. The concept of causal mechanisms has value for this exercise as it focuses attention on the detailed processes through which cause produces effect. My understanding of causal mechanisms is drawn from Hedström and Ylikoski's influential article, which describes mechanism-based explanation as revealing 'the cogs and wheels of the causal process through which the outcome to be explained was brought about' (2010: 50). The word 'mechanism' and the reference to 'cogs and wheels' should not be taken to suggest that human behaviour should be seen in mechanistic terms, as being completely regular and predictable. It rather indicates the need for detailed understanding of the complexities involved within causal relationships. In contrast to many quantitative studies – which attempt to prove causal connections through measuring statistical correlations between variables, with comparatively little attention to the intervening processes through which these are linked – here the focus is precisely on understanding these intervening processes in as much detail as possible.

In political science, mechanism-based thinking has often been linked to the specific method of process tracing (George and Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011; Bennett and Checkel, 2015). Process tracing is suitable for testing the relative validity of particular mechanisms in explaining an outcome of interest. It is not appropriate for this thesis, however, as there is little pre-existing theorisation of the causal links between

international development aid and authoritarian political dominance. The intention here is not to prove or disprove specific, pre-existing theories about how aid affects authoritarian regimes, once and for all – but to expand existing thinking by developing a first draft of a more sophisticated understanding of the relationships between development projects and authoritarian rule than has previously been put forward.

The thesis does, however, seek to go beyond simply hypothesising about the possible causal links between aid and authoritarianism. For this reason, the conceptual framework (chapter 3), which brings together a series of broad propositions about how projects are understood to affect authoritarian political dominance, is refined by being exposed to the realities of an empirical case study, with a strong focus on the understandings of people who lived through a development intervention and whose lives intersected with it.

I selected a 'most likely case' for a project which, according to the existing literature, was expected to strengthen a regime's political dominance (George and Bennett, 2005: 20; see also Eckstein, 1992). I go into the rationale for this choice in more detail in chapter 2, but essentially this was done because I wanted to challenge existing thinking, to allow research participants' perspectives to guide the research, and to support the development of more nuanced models to understand the aid-authoritarianism relationship. The thesis provides, through its empirical material, an illustration of what it looks like when an aid project either strengthens or undermines a regime's dominance, which can be helpful both to future scholars and policy makers; and it provides a conceptual framework, revised and refined in chapter 8 in light of the empirical material, which sets out a more nuanced account of the relationship between aid and authoritarianism than has been possible to date.

The final strategic choice was to focus the thesis on the effects of projects *over the long term*. The rationale for this was again about gaining a fuller understanding of a project's effects than is possible either during implementation or shortly after closure. Many evaluations state that they are not able to assess the full effects of the projects and programmes they are reviewing. Shortly after closure, it is unclear whether changes brought about by projects are likely to persist, or whether they will be forgotten and previous practices return. This applies as much to political outcomes of projects as it does to the kinds of changes projects explicitly intend to bring about. In reviewing a project a decade after its closure, I hoped to develop an understanding of its most significant and lasting political consequences. These included consequences it had had during implementation but which were still remembered afterwards, as well as consequences which only emerged during its 'afterlife' (Gez, 2021; Gez et al., 2022; Schler and Gez, 2018).

In gathering empirical data, the thesis adopted an ethnographic-historical approach, which used archives, interviews and informal conversations to build a picture both of what happened in Merhabete during and after project implementation, and of people's perceptions of the project and its effects. In carrying out interviews, I drew on methods of oral history, and particularly the life-work-history method (Lewis, 2008b, 2008a) as this allowed research participants the time and freedom to expand on their own experiences of the project, as well as their perspectives and understandings of its consequences.

In selecting the case, in addition to the rationale set out earlier for choosing a most likely case for a project which was expected to strengthen authoritarian political dominance, there were also other reasons why the MIRDP was particularly suitable for

this study. Firstly, it had closed 10 years previously. This was far enough in the past for its short-term consequences to have subsided and for longer-term consequences to be observed, but was also close enough that memories of the project were still relatively fresh in people's minds. Secondly, the MIRDP was a major intervention in an area where hardly any other externally-financed development initiatives had been active either at the time or since. This meant that people's memories of the project were likely to be unclouded by memories of other development projects. Thirdly, it was helpful for the study that the MIRDP was implemented directly by MfM without intermediary organisations. This meant, again, that the study could focus on the legacy of the project without needing to distinguish the different roles of organisations in the implementing chain. Further details about the methodology of the thesis are provided in the next chapter.

Structure of the thesis

Following this introduction, the thesis is formed of eight further chapters. Chapter 2 sets out the methodology used, covering the approach taken to developing the conceptual framework and gathering empirical data, as well as discussing my own positionality in the research. Chapter 3 then presents the conceptual framework. Based on existing literature on foreign aid, NGOs, authoritarianism, and peacebuilding, as well as anthropological and historical studies of development projects, it puts forward three mechanisms through which development projects are understood to impact on authoritarian political dominance. Through *building structures* such as roads, schools, clinics, and offices, projects can enhance regimes' reach and improve their image in previously remote areas of their territory. Through *distributing resources* which can be captured by regimes,

projects can allow regimes to co-opt or influence sections of the population. Through projects' *legitimation practices* such as strategic alignment and use of developmentalist narratives, projects can reinforce regime legitimating narratives. These processes are of course highly interdependent; they are treated separately for analytical clarity, but links between them are drawn throughout the thesis.

Chapter 4 then begins the work of applying this framework to the Ethiopian context. After a brief introduction to Ethiopian political history, it focuses on how the EPRDF regime sought to maintain its political dominance in the country. It also introduces MfM and the MIRDP in more detail, and justifies why the MIRDP should be seen as a most likely case for a project which strengthened regime dominance.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 form the empirical heart of the thesis. Each chapter focuses on one of the three mechanisms elaborated in the conceptual framework, reviewing the extent to which it operated in the case of the MIRDP. Chapter 5 focuses on the project's material legacy: the structures it built. It finds that, a decade after the project had closed, the roads, schools, clinics, and hospital it had built had significantly increased regime reach across the district. However, these structures did not improve regime image in the area, in fact rather undermining the regime's claim to be delivering development.

Chapter 6 turns to the MIRDP's distribution of resources, including cash and in-kind distributions such as seeds, animals, or clothes. The chapter shows how the regime succeeded in exerting strong influence over some resource streams, such as training, but had much less control over others, such as recruitment of staff. The long-term effect of this was that the project created an influential group of people who had a degree of economic independence from the regime.

Chapter 7 turns to how MfM attempted to legitimate its actions with the people of Merhabete. Although MfM staff pursued strategic alignment with the regime, they also distinguished carefully between NGO and government, in particular in insisting that MfM was ‘non-political’. The chapter also reviews Karlheinz Böhm’s visits to Merhabete and the way they communicated a sense of his seniority and importance, but also emphasised his differences from Ethiopian leaders.

Chapter 8 then brings the different strands of the argument together. It returns to the conceptual framework, refining it in the light of the evidence provided in the empirical chapters. It notes the elements of the mechanisms in the conceptual framework which operated as expected, and those which needed to be refined. It sets out the core argument around how the project undermined regime political dominance, and the different elements underpinning this. It also reviews the question of how widely we should expect the findings of the thesis to be replicated elsewhere.

Chapter 9 then concludes the thesis by encapsulating the thesis’s key contributions to debates on aid and authoritarianism. It also outlines contributions to other debates on aid and government legitimacy, sets out the thesis’s methodological contribution, and addresses the implications for agencies providing aid in authoritarian contexts. The fact that aid does not always strengthen regimes indicates that there is some scope for continued development work in these countries, although there is a need both for agencies and researchers to develop a much stronger understanding of projects’ political consequences.

Chapter 2: Researching the political legacy of an international development project

The introduction established the overall research approach adopted in this thesis. This chapter now expands on how I went about implementing this approach. The research design was grounded in two core commitments. The first was to place research participants at the centre of the study, allowing them as much freedom as possible to expand on their own experiences and understandings, rather than attempting to shoehorn these into pre-defined categories. The second commitment was to ensure the research could speak to wider debates about how development projects influence authoritarian political dominance – in particular by identifying particular mechanisms through which this connection can be understood to function. Whilst there were clearly tensions involved in this approach, which are brought out below, I will argue these were not insurmountable. The approach taken allowed the perspectives of interviewees to play a greater role in the thesis than many other studies on aid and authoritarianism.

The chapter begins with a discussion on how I positioned myself in the research. It then moves on to set out the overall research design in more general terms, including how I developed and refined the conceptual framework and how I made use of oral history as a methodological approach. Lastly, the specific methods used are outlined, including life-work history interviews and archival data collection, and I also give an overview of how data collection unfolded in practice.

Positionality in the research

In recent years, there has been a growing perception that the concepts through which 'development' has been defined and understood effectively position Europe and North America as a global norm against which other countries are judged. Fundamentally, development has been a project of attempting to help people living in Africa, Asia and South America (as well as other areas) to attain better living standards. Whilst people living in these areas often share in the dream of a better life, an important side effect of the development business has been to suggest, at least implicitly, that the way things are done in Europe and North America should be seen as a kind of universal standard. Through development programmes, development agencies have been accused of attempting to reform a wide range of institutions and social practices with a view to bringing them in line with Western models (Pailey, 2020; see also Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 1992).

Importantly, research itself has been seen as contributing to this process. Some scholars accuse researchers of devising conceptual frameworks which reify Western standards as the norm, and establishing extractive relations with research participants, who are seen as little more than data points adding to researchers' already-superior knowledge (Bilgen et al., 2021). Independently from the concept of development, researchers face complex issues of power relations in any research that involves human subjects, and these are heightened when disparities of race, income and gender become involved (see for example Henry et al., 2009).

As a white, middle-aged man – and in particular as someone who works for the UK government on international development policy and programming – I could not avoid

these issues as I went about conducting the research. Data collection was carried out at a time when I was living in Addis Ababa, on unpaid leave from my role with the UK Department for International Development (DFID). I had followed my wife to Ethiopia due to her employment with the Goethe-Institut, the German language and cultural organisation. Though I was not working for the UK government at the time, I was nonetheless in the role of an 'expatriate', with all the privileges that brought.

Much as I might have preferred a world in which different dynamics governed international relations and shaped global norms, this was not within my control. As a white man in rural Ethiopia, I stood out on the street and children in particular noticed me. I was generally treated with a respect that others might not have been granted. Also, many people linked me to the possibility of money coming to the *wereda*. In some cases, people actually thought that I was a relative of Karlheinz Böhm or that I was there to bring MfM back to Merhabete. I could not control these expectations.

What I could control was my research design. My overall purpose in carrying out the research was precisely to uncover some of the uncomfortable consequences of international aid, lifting the blinkers of the aid bureaucrat with a view towards making aid less liable to impose unwanted effects on those it was supposed to help. But in doing so, I also wanted to ensure the research itself was grounded in the perspectives and understandings of Merhabete residents, to allow space for them to describe how they understood events around the implementation of the project and its afterlives. I wanted to avoid, as far as possible, imposing my own understandings on theirs.

This had two main implications, one which affected the research design and one which affected my methods. In terms of research design, I was keen to make sure that any

conceptual architecture I employed was kept flexible. Whilst I wanted to engage with existing understandings of aid and authoritarianism in the literature, it would be important that I remained open to surprises throughout the research process. As Diane Vaughan has observed, 'the paradox of theory is that at the same time it tells us where to look, it can keep us from seeing' (Vaughan, 1992: 195). It was an assumption of the research design that through the process of data collection – where I would enhance my understanding of people's lives in Merhabete, hear their accounts of the project, and set these alongside the archival evidence – pathways of influence between the MIRDP and EPRDF's political dominance would emerge which had not been foreseen in advance.

The second implication of my positionality was related to how I conducted interviews. As I will elaborate below, I was keen to allow interviewees the time and space to expand on their experiences with MfM and the MIRDP, and their understandings of its meanings, in their own words rather than moderated through my concepts. I therefore kept my own prompts to a minimum and allowed them to speak at length without interruption. The oral history method lent itself well to this approach. As perhaps the best-known textbook on oral history puts it, 'the historian comes to the interview to learn: to sit at the feet of others who, because they come from a different social class, or are less educated, or are older, know more about something' (Thompson and Bornat, 2017: 10). It was my strong intention in the research to learn from my interviewees, to situate them as knowing more than me about the effects of development projects.

In order for me to learn from interviewees, and to put them at their ease and ensure that they were as comfortable as possible putting forward their own experiences and perspectives, I attempted as far as possible to avoid the trappings of the wealthy and

powerful expatriate. I travelled around Merhabete on foot and on local public transport, so that I did not announce my arrival with a large four-wheel-drive vehicle, which would have further strengthened people's assumptions about my wealth and power. I managed my travel arrangements alone, without any support from MfM itself, which also was helpful in playing down any association between me and MfM that people might have expected. The rest of this chapter sets out how I designed the research and the methods used in the light of this positionality.

Research design

The research design involved developing a conceptual framework as a heuristic device based on existing understandings of the relations between aid and authoritarianism in the literature (chapter 3), exposing this framework to the realities of a case study of a development project (chapters 5-7) and returning to the framework to revise and refine it (chapter 8).

The conceptual framework sets out some broad propositions about how development projects can influence authoritarian regimes' political dominance, based on literatures on foreign aid, NGOs, authoritarianism, and peacebuilding, as well as anthropological and historical studies of development projects. As noted above, it was a priority for me to ensure that the conceptual framework did not unduly limit data collection. The propositions were therefore developed as a set of guideposts which provided orientation during data collection. They were a starting point but not an end point. During the empirical phase of the research, drawing on interviews and archival data, I continually assessed the fit between the propositions and the data collected, refining the framework

as I proceeded. Chapter 8 sets out the revisions to the framework that were made after the empirical phase of the research.

This approach sits between a purely inductive approach such as grounded theory, and pure deductive reasoning where hypotheses are developed and tested. Sean Yom has used the term ‘inductive iteration’ to describe this process in comparative research (Yom, 2015), although in practice, variations of this approach are adopted in much case study research (see for example Yin, 2017). A deductive approach was rejected on the grounds that it would not allow sufficient scope for research participants to raise issues which were not explicitly included in the original conceptual architecture. On the other hand, I did not use a purely inductive approach because I wanted the study to be able to address existing debates about aid and authoritarianism, and to identify particular causal mechanisms. The process of inductive iteration nonetheless allowed me to learn from interviewees as they had the opportunity to raise issues relevant to the links between aid and authoritarianism which the conceptual framework struggled to explain.

My assumption that interviewees would likely have knowledge which might push against some of the propositions in the conceptual framework motivated my decision to select a case of a development project which was highly likely to strengthen regime political dominance. ‘Most likely cases’ are often selected by researchers for their power to invalidate theories: if a theory fails to fit a case in which it is most likely to be true, the theory is strongly undermined (George and Bennett, 2005: 20; see also Eckstein, 1992). For this thesis, there was no pre-existing theory about mechanisms linking aid and authoritarianism that I was specifically seeking to invalidate. But I did anticipate that the empirical data would reveal limitations in the conceptual framework I myself had

developed based on existing literature. This was partly because much of the literature on aid and authoritarianism assumes that aid is bolstering authoritarian regimes.

I selected a most likely case because I thought it possible that, through talking to local residents, I might discover that even a project of this kind would not have simply strengthened regime dominance but instead would have had more complex effects. If this in fact transpired – that is, if a most likely case for a project which should strengthen regime dominance in fact weakened it in some respects – this would indicate a need for significant rethinking about the links between aid and authoritarianism.

The particular value of a most likely case research design for this thesis was that, on the one hand, it was a single case, which increased empirical detail and complexity compared to comparative studies. This was important for me as it meant I had more time to speak to and learn from local residents in the case study area. On the other hand, the fact that it was a most likely case meant that it had a high inferential value compared with other single cases. If a case which was highly likely to strengthen a regime's political dominance provided evidence that its dominance was weakened, this would imply that something similar might apply to a large number of other cases.

In gathering empirical data, the thesis adopted an ethnographic-historical approach, which sought to foreground the understandings of people whose lives intersected with the project. Whether they were farmers or other Merhabete residents (who may or may not have been selected for assistance under the project), government officials (at district or village levels), or project staff (from agricultural experts to security guards and cleaners), these people had unique insights into what happened as a result of the MIRDP, what its effects were on their lives and the lives of others, and how all this impacted on the regime

and its political dominance. Rather than attempting to gather these insights through surveys, which impose a predetermined framework of understanding as to what project effects might be, the emphasis here was on accessing people's perceptions as far as possible in their own words.

As an outsider in Merhabete, it was of course not easy to discover people's real perceptions and opinions, particularly opinions of more marginalised people, and also especially on controversial topics such as the legitimacy of the incumbent regime. I therefore sought to adopt an 'ethnographic stance', described by Sherry Ortner as 'the attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing' (Ortner, 1995: 173). I spent as much time as I could in the project area, developing relationships of trust with participants. I got to know many people in the *wereda* and socialised with them outside of the formal interview context, and attended social gatherings and religious ceremonies such as Ethiopian Christmas (*gena*) when these were happening during the time of my fieldwork.

It would not have been possible for me to do this without my two Ethiopian research assistants: one female, and one male. I had learnt Amharic during my time in Ethiopia to the point where I could engage in informal conversations, and would also often understand the gist of people's responses to questions during interviews. However, my knowledge of the language was not sufficient to allow me to manage the whole process of data collection alone. I identified both research assistants in Addis Ababa through local networks. I briefed them on the project, its objectives, and the life-work history format of interviews. Research assistants provided a huge amount of help, identifying suitable interviewees in Merhabete, aiding the process of snowball sampling; providing short

translations during Amharic interviews; and generally helping to cultivate good relationships with people locally, often joining me in social gatherings.

The main form of interview was an oral history interview, using the 'life-work history' method. I review the specific method in the next section, but here it is important to note that in doing so, I used oral history interviews in a similar way to how they are used by oral historians: that is, both to establish questions of fact and to explore more personal meaning and subjectivity. Many oral historians are interested both in recovering accurate details of past events which may be partially or not at all evidenced in written sources (see for example Browning, 2010; Figes, 2008; Roseman, 1999; Thompson and Bornat, 2017). In doing so, they argue that oral testimony is not intrinsically less reliable than written sources, such as newspapers, correspondence, government reports and statistics, which also encode significant biases (Thompson and Bornat, 2017: 188-93).

Oral testimony has been critiqued due to the distance in time between the events described and the interview, meaning that memory and subsequent changes in values and norms may shape the descriptions of past events. This is not disputed by oral historians, but most would argue that other interviews are subject to similar dynamics, especially those which refer to events which happened more than a few months previously. Following oral historians, I used basic historical tests of reliability for oral sources, similar to those used for other kinds of historical source material – that is, searching for internal consistency, triangulating details from other sources, including written sources, and weighing evidence against a wider context (Thompson and Bornat, 2017: 222).

Despite this, the insight that oral history interviews provide into subjective personal meaning, mediated through memory, is also valuable. As Alessandro Portelli famously argued, the very subjectivity of oral sources may be their most 'unique and precious element' (1981: 99; see also Portelli, 1991). Even in cases where people's memories are factually inaccurate, Portelli argued, they can be highly revealing for the historian because they indicate the context people place events into and the meaning they give them. For this thesis, the fact that people remember certain events vividly tells us something about why they remain important to people years afterwards. I therefore used oral history interviews to assess people's subjective understandings of the project and what it meant for the regime, alongside using them to establish certain points of fact.

Methods

The main modes of enquiry were archival research, life-work history interviews, informal conversations, and observation of the built environment. Data collection was carried out over a two-year period between 2018-2020, during which I was living in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. To enable the research in country, I applied for and received an affiliation with the Department of Social Anthropology at Addis Ababa University. This was very helpful in facilitating various aspects of the research including access to archives and local permissions for research in Merhabete *wereda*. I also applied for and received ethical approval through the University of Birmingham, with the reference number ERN_18-0248A.

The archival research and interviews proceeded in parallel. In Addis Ababa, I approached MfM who granted me interviews with current and former staff who had been

involved in the Merhabete project, and also allowed me to access various digital and hard copy files related to it. MfM staff were generally interested in the research, and the possibility it might help them to learn more from their work. They specifically suggested Merhabete as a suitable project for me to investigate, which may have been linked to the fact it was seen by MfM as having been successful. Although MfM staff were generally welcoming and helpful, after a certain amount of time I had the impression that my visits were becoming somewhat less welcome, perhaps understandably because I was taking up valuable staff time. As the archival record for the project that I accessed was incomplete (see below), I continued to ask for access to files relating to missing periods, but was unsuccessful. This may reflect the fact these files had not been preserved. Overall, I was very grateful that MfM staff allowed me to access their archives and facilitated links to key staff.

In parallel with my discussions with MfM, I made eight separate visits to Merhabete *wereda* between 2018-2020. Each visit lasted between a few days and two weeks. The first visit, in June 2018, was a brief scoping trip; the second in November 2018 was specifically focused on accessing the *wereda* archives. After this, I made six further visits between April 2019 and January 2020 during which time I held the majority of my interviews. Interviews were also held in Addis Ababa throughout this time, and I made two visits to Debre Berhan (the capital of the North Shewa zone in which Merhabete is located) in early 2020 both to access archives and conduct interviews. The last interviews were conducted in early March 2020. In what follows below, I review the methods in turn, setting out in detail how they were used in the research.

Interviews and informal conversations

For interviews, I adopted what David Lewis called the 'life-work history' method, which synthesises elements from a broad life-history interview with a more focused semi-structured interview (Lewis, 2008a, 2008b). The benefit of drawing on life histories, as Lewis sets out, is that they provide historical and ethnographic depth, adding texture and detail to an account. Also, these interviews enable researchers to benefit from the perspectives of marginalised sections of the community, which was an objective of the research. A long-format, relatively free-flowing interview allows these people's voices to be heard in a way that they would not be in either a more structured interview or in a larger grouping such as a focus group.

The life-work history method adopts aspects of life history interviews, but focuses discussion on individuals' work lives. In the case of my research, I opened interviews by asking people what they were doing in their work lives before MfM arrived in Merhabete, and then invited them to narrate how (if at all) their work lives changed as the project was implemented. Interviews were allowed to flow freely, and participants could focus on the stories they found most important. If participants wanted to speak at length I allowed them to continue without interruption, pausing only for occasional translation (on which more below).

However, there were certain limited elements of the interview which were structured. It was important to identify which people had been employed by the project, for example as security guards, or had received resources from it such as training allowances or agricultural inputs. If participants did not mention this during interviews, I asked them whether they had been involved in the project in these ways. I also concluded every

interview with a question about how they felt the project had affected people's lives in the district, and their own lives. This was a way of inviting people to reflect on the project's legacy. Despite this prompt, I decided not to ask people specific questions about the political consequences of the project, unless they broached this topic themselves. This was because I wanted to allow people the freedom to tell their own stories about the project with a focus on their own understandings of its effects.

The majority of interviews were carried out in Merhabete *wereda*. Altogether 82 interviews were carried out there, twelve of which were with former MfM staff (including security guards), ten with former government officials, and the rest with local residents, many but not all of whom had been involved with the project in some way. Five individuals were interviewed more than once (four people twice and one three times). I also carried out an additional 27 interviews in Addis Ababa and Debre Berhan. Many of these interviews were with former MfM staff or government officials who had moved away from the area. Finally I carried out two online interviews with people who had been closely involved in the project but were living in Europe at the time of the research.

Research participants were mostly selected through snowball sampling, building trust via personal connections. In a few cases, I used purposive sampling, specifically seeking out individuals I had identified in the archives who I knew had played an important role in the project. In Merhabete, it was generally easier to meet better-connected people, including those who had been project staff or recipients of support. Whenever I arrived in a new area I was introduced to the district administration, who recommended particular people I should talk to. In order to counteract the tendency for officials to select research participants, I also usually tried to identify contacts in particular areas before visiting, using

snowball sampling from previous meetings. However, this method would still tend to link me mainly to the better-off and better-connected people in the district. As people knew I was researching MfM, they naturally also recommended people who had played a role in the project.

I therefore made efforts to identify people who had not been involved or were less well-connected. I used some purposive sampling, for example seeking out individuals named in the archives, such as those mentioned in a detailed survey of women in the district in the 1990s. This included the names of many women who were less well-off at the time. I also asked for connections to people who had worked as daily labourers, who were generally a socially less well-connected group. Finally, I used chance encounters to talk to people about the project, for example initiating conversations at a bus stop or while walking on the road. These strategies undoubtedly helped me to meet less well-connected individuals, though it is likely fair to say that overall, my sample of interviewees was weighted more towards better-connected individuals who had played a role in the project. I reflect on the implications of this in the conclusion.

Most interviews in Merhabete were carried out in Amharic, while interviews outside of Merhabete were either in Amharic or English. My preference was to record interviews and after receiving individuals' consent, 64 interviews were recorded using digital audio equipment. In these interviews, when they were in Amharic, I asked research assistants not to translate in full, but periodically to give me a summary of what participants had said. This enabled me to follow the interview and to keep it on track if necessary, but allowed participants to speak freely with minimal interruption. As I was conscious that women might be more comfortable talking to a woman interviewer, in four cases, my female

research assistant interviewed female participants without me. She followed the same interview structure which I had developed and all these interviews were recorded. This format allowed a certain intimacy to develop which likely would not have manifested had I been present. All recorded interviews were later translated and transcribed, in collaboration with research assistants.

In some interviews, people refused recording, or otherwise I or my research assistants judged that the situation made it inappropriate (for example, where the individual was showing some signs of wariness and we did not want to intimidate them). In these cases, I asked research assistants to provide relatively full translations during the interview, which allowed me to take notes. This was a necessary trade off to ensure that relevant information was captured whilst respecting participants' wishes not to be recorded.

In some cases, I was introduced to people who I would have ideally liked to have interviewed but the circumstances meant that my research assistants and I judged it was better not to hold a formal interview at all. This was perhaps as we had met in a social context, where bringing out a notebook would change the dynamic, or where people were particularly cautious about the research. Where we decided not to formalise the interview, we held a discussion but I did not take notes. Afterwards I sat down with research assistants and took retrospective notes, to ensure we captured as much as possible of what had been said. However, as these were discussions, not formal interviews, I did not quote them in the thesis; the information was treated as background.

The majority of interviews were carried out with one individual but in several cases, two people were interviewed together or, in some cases, the interviewee was interviewed in his or her home where others were also present. This was usually determined by

whatever was most natural to participants; if we were in someone's home we did not attempt to take an individual out of that context to impose privacy, but in some cases we arranged to meet individuals in a local bar or restaurant and then they would be interviewed alone. In the early phases of research, I also held a focus group discussion, but this was judged not to be as useful as it was not as suitable for the life-work history method.

In addition to interviews, I also held various informal conversations throughout my time in the *wereda* which added to my understanding of the project. People would sometimes ask me what I was doing when I met them on the street. When I mentioned that I was studying MfM, people would sometimes produce stories from their memories of the project and these were valuable evidence which added colour and context to the longer-format interviews. On one or two occasions, these discussions led to a small crowd gathering round, with others joining and contributing their own experiences. In addition to this, I got to know some research participants well and met up socially with these people on various occasions during my visits to Merhabete. This helped to add to my understanding of contemporary developments and politics in the *wereda*.

Interviews largely took place between around April 2019 and February 2020. There were no major political changes during this period which was a relatively calm and stable time in Ethiopia at least compared to the periods before and after. Nonetheless, there were tensions in this period as Amhara nationalism was rising, together with opposition to the leadership of the new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed (Makahamadze and Fikade, 2022; Tazebew, 2021). When people spoke to me about their frustrations with the regime's lack of action on development in comparison to the work of MfM, these were

likely refracted through contemporary political concerns. To me, this indicated the lasting significance of the project as it still had meaning for people in relation to contemporary political discussions a decade after it closed.

In the previous section, I noted the importance of memory in oral history interviews. I did come across some examples of confusion in people's memories, for example between the role of MfM, sometimes referred to as 'Menschen', and the 'Mission' or the Southern Baptist Mission which had operated in the district in the 1980s and 1990s. It was not fully clear if this was a problem of memory or whether people at the time mixed up the two organisations.

Another example of apparent confusion was in discussions about model farmers – those who were selected to be examples to their peers. MfM introduced the concept of model farmers in the 1990s and it was later taken on by the government. I received mixed answers on whether MfM model farmers and government model farmers were the same. Some people were insistent that the two were totally separate and others argued there was no difference. Drawing on the archival record, and triangulating interviews against each other, I drew the conclusion that the roles were formally separate, but sometimes the same individuals could be selected for both. The fact that people gave different answers to the question may have reflected their own political leanings. Those who understood the model farmer role as having political responsibilities linked to supporting EPRDF would likely have seen no difference between being a model farmer for MfM or the regime. In contrast, those who were more hostile towards the regime wanted to draw a sharp distinction between the two, with MfM's model farmer scheme situated as a 'purer' or more 'developmental' one than that of the regime. I return to the role of model farmers

in chapter 6, but these discussions show how people's memories can be affected by their sense of what is important at the time of recall. Nonetheless, they do not invalidate the use of oral history as a method of establishing events in the past.

Archives and observation of buildings

The archival element of the research involved locating and analysing documents dating to the time of project implementation which were related to the MIRDP and Merhabete *wereda*. These sources were relatively fragmentary and spread across different sites; my aim was to locate as many sources on the project as I could find, alongside any sources which touched on politics in Merhabete. The two main sources used were the archives of MfM in Addis Ababa, and the archives of the *wereda* administration in Alem Ketema (the main town of Merhabete).

MfM had kept many records relating to the project, but these had not been systematically archived and preservation of project documents was incomplete. I was granted access to folders related to the MIRDP which contained correspondence, records of meetings, plans, and reports dating to 1994-96 and 2003-09, leaving a period between 1997 and 2002 where there were few documents available. In addition to these, I was also given access to annual reports for the MIRDP for all years from 2002 onwards, two evaluations of the project dating to 2009 and 2015, and various other reports and studies, including three reports on Merhabete carried out by project staff in the early phase of the project in 1989-90. These documents were mostly in English but some were in German, a language I speak well. Most documents were accessed in hard copy but some annual reports and evaluations were provided to me in digital form. I also located online the first

five-year plan for the project, dating from 1987. Finally, in MfM's office in Addis Ababa I was also shown publicity books in German on MfM and Karlheinz Böhm's work in Ethiopia.

These documents gave an important overview of the activities carried out under the project, including lists of buildings constructed. In addition to this, they provided an insight into the 'official' MfM perspective on the project, together with the illumination of some internal tensions within MfM. They shed light on relations between MfM and the local government, and the extent of formal oversight that officials had over the project. Finally, these archives provided me with a general understanding of the project that enabled a more informed discussion with interviewees.

The *wereda* administration in Alem Ketema also supported the research and allowed me to search their records for files related to the project. The administration did not have access to sufficient office space to maintain old files so they were stored in shipping containers that were in some cases not watertight, leading to deterioration of some documents. With the help of one of my research assistants, I located various folders which related to the project, including one on the administration's dealings with NGOs, and another on local emergency support. These included reports, letters, and records of meetings between various NGOs and the administration as well as internal correspondence, either between different government offices in Merhabete *wereda* or between the *wereda* and higher levels of the bureaucracy. I also found some quarterly reports submitted by MfM to the local administration and assorted other reports from MfM on specific topics. These documents were mainly in Amharic with some in English. For Amharic sources, I worked through each with the research assistant and made notes in

English on their content. Any document which was to be quoted directly was translated in full. These sources were mainly useful for understanding the official dealings between the project and the administration, for example the periodic evaluations of the MIRDP by government staff, and the issues that featured most in these discussions.

In Addis Ababa I was granted access to the video archives of the Ethiopia Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) which contained archived video footage of various television programmes on Karlheinz Böhm and MfM. A documentary on the opening of the Alem Ketema Enat Hospital was particularly useful. These television programmes were a useful illustration of how the regime had attempted to present the work of MfM to citizens. They were in Amharic so my research assistant provided translations during the visit. I also visited the Authority for Civil Society Organisations in Addis Ababa, but was not granted access to their files before I left Ethiopia. Finally, I also visited the North Shoa Zone administration in Debre Berhan and reviewed some documents there, but none of these added significantly to what I had already reviewed in Alem Ketema.

A final archival source was newspaper and media articles in English or German. A comprehensive search of the allafrica.com online newspaper archive was carried out, using the search terms ‘Menschen für Menschen,’ ‘Böhm,’ ‘Merhabete,’ and ‘Alem Ketema’. Several relevant articles were identified in English-language Ethiopian newspapers and journals such as the Ethiopian Herald, Addis Tribune, Ethiopian Review and the Daily Monitor. These included publicity articles on the MIRDP (perhaps commissioned by MfM), reports on road building, and some reporting around the 2005 elections on Merhabete as an area where results were contested. In addition to this I also located accounts from German journalists who had visited Merhabete with MfM, various

interviews with Karlheinz Böhm, and some German newspaper articles about the project. These provided insights into the way Böhm understood and presented the work of MfM in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

The final element of data collection was observation of buildings and other project-built structures. Over the course of my visits, I walked around many of the *kebele* (sub-districts) of Merhabete as well as Alem Ketema, the *wereda* town. Many structures built by MfM were still visible. I asked research participants to show me buildings that had been constructed by MfM; both I and my research assistant photographed them. I compared project-built structures, such as school blocks, with those built prior to the project. I also observed whether structures had been maintained or allowed to decay, and reviewed whether they were still in use and what they were being used for (for example, former MfM project offices were repurposed as government buildings).

Conclusion

This chapter has set out how I sought to resolve the tension between designing the thesis to speak to existing debates on aid and authoritarianism, on the one hand, and ensuring that it remained open to the perspectives and experiences of research participants, on the other. I began by outlining my positionality as a white male, and an employee of the UK government, who was keen to avoid imposing my own views and concepts on research participants and wanted primarily to hear from them.

The chapter then elaborated the research design. It set out how I developed a conceptual framework as a heuristic device, a starting point rather than an end point. This was a way of allowing space for interviewees to use their own concepts to explain how

they understood the effects of the project in the case study, which could then be used to revise and refine the conceptual framework. I explained the reasons behind selecting a ‘most likely case’ as a case study. These centred on the way it allowed for sufficient depth to the research, whilst also giving the study inferential value. I also outlined my approach to using interviews and archival research both to identify events in the past and to access perceptions. Finally, I outlined in detail the methods used, including life-work history interviews and archival research, the implications of using these methods, and my experience of using them during data collection.

The next chapter presents the conceptual framework used in the thesis. This provides a synthesis of existing literature on aid and authoritarianism which the empirical part of the thesis then proceeds to question and challenge.

Chapter 3: International development projects and authoritarian political dominance

Despite a wealth of literature related to the question of how international development projects might impact on authoritarian rule, few studies have attempted to theorise the multiple ways in which these can be linked. This chapter develops a conceptual framework which synthesises existing literature to propose three mechanisms through which development projects can influence authoritarian political dominance.

The chapter begins by reviewing the existing literature, with a view to identifying mechanisms that other scholars have put forward to explain causal links between international development projects and authoritarian rule. Reflecting the state of the recent literature, this is mainly focused on mechanisms which suggest that aid bolsters authoritarian rule, although I do also consider studies which investigate the possibility that aid might support democracy or undermine authoritarian rulers.

Following this, the conceptual framework is then put forward in three sections. The first sets out authoritarian regimes' strategies to maintain political dominance. It suggests that there are three strategies that regimes principally use to do this: violent coercion, using resources as incentives, and disseminating legitimating narratives. A second section then reviews the importance of the state apparatus in maintaining regimes' political dominance, which can play a role in all three strategies. The third section then turns to the role played by international development projects in reinforcing regimes' strategies for dominance over the long term. This section constitutes the bulk of the chapter and puts forward three

mechanisms linking international development projects to authoritarian political dominance: through *building structures* which can increase a regime's reach across the national territory, through *distribution of resources* which may be captured by regimes, and through *legitimation practices* which can enhance a regime's legitimacy.[9]

In summary, based on the existing literature, the chapter theorises that development projects will likely strengthen regime political dominance when, firstly, they construct infrastructure and buildings for regimes, and do not develop a parallel system of service delivery through non-state buildings; secondly, when regimes maintain control of project resources, and these are not captured by groups which oppose the regime; and thirdly, when projects align their activities and communications with regimes, using development language which emphasises the role of outsiders (development agencies and regimes) in bringing development to the people, rather than suggesting that people need to bring development to the regime. The analysis presents the three mechanisms separately for analytical clarity, although in practice, there are often many interlinkages between them, as will be seen throughout the thesis.

Mechanisms in the literature

In principle, it is possible that international development projects might support authoritarian rulers, undermine them, or have no political effects. Traditionally, many

[9] Please note that I make a distinction between legitimating *narratives*, which are discursive claims about the legitimacy of a regime or another social group, and a wider set of legitimation *practices*, which include both the deployment of legitimating narratives and also other practices which are intended to cultivate legitimacy but are not linked to a specific discursive claim. I expand on this more below in the discussion on the mechanism on legitimation practices.

development agencies subscribed to the idea that their projects and programmes were politically neutral. In recent years, however, this has been discredited within many bilateral donors and INGOs. Rather, agencies have urged their staff to 'think and work politically' with a view to increasing aid effectiveness (Laws and Marquette, 2018; Carothers and De Gramont, 2013). Staff have been encouraged to accept the trade-offs involved with working with authoritarian regimes. Ideas such as 'good enough governance', 'working with the grain' of recipient country politics, and 'developmental patrimonialism' (Grindle, 2004; Booth, 2009; Kelsall et al., 2010; Booth and Golooba-Mutebi, 2012) implied that aid might strengthen authoritarian rulers, but this was a price worth paying in exchange for improving health, education and economic growth. Also among scholarly literature, the claim that aid is politically neutral is seldom made. Whilst a few quantitative studies have found null effects of aid for example on democracy (Knack, 2004) or government legitimacy (Dietrich and Winters, 2015), findings are not consistently repeated, and these studies rarely consider the effects of aid on authoritarian regimes specifically.

A previous generation of research had expressed the hope that aid might strengthen democracy (see for example Resnick and van de Walle, 2013; Kalyvitis and Vlachaki, 2012; Bermeo, 2011; Kono and Montinola, 2009; Knack, 2004). However, this literature was generally inconclusive on the connection. The most recent summary of this literature finds that aid projects which are specifically targeted at supporting democracy appear to have a positive effect on democracy, but this is not clear for general development aid (Gisselquist et al., 2021).

Over the past 15 years or so, there has been much more support in the academic literature for the notion that aid strengthens authoritarian political dominance. This section

summarises the arguments in these literatures about how aid is understood as having this effect. At the end of the section, I also review arguments about possible mechanisms through which aid might be understood to weaken regimes' dominance, though there has been much less work on this.

One of the most common arguments made about how aid contributes to authoritarianism is that it provides regimes with increased amounts of patronage (Ahmed, 2012; Jablonski, 2014; Bader and Faust, 2014; Bueno De Mesquita and Smith, 2010; de Waal, 2015). Aid flows increase the resources that a regime has at its disposal. If aid resources are provided to state institutions, and if divisions between state and government are blurred, regimes have the potential to use these resources to bolster their position domestically, by providing them to strategically important groups and withholding them from others. This can include clandestine, corrupt activity, where aid money is diverted away from intended purposes and provided to regime allies (Briggs, 2015). It can also include lawful and open activity which benefits strategic groups, for example using aid to build a road to the geographic location of a regime's political base (Briggs, 2012, 2014).

The most direct way this mechanism can function is where resources are provided to state institutions in the form of budget support; however, studies have shown that even where aid is routed through NGOs and not through the state, regimes have demonstrated the ability to control these resource flows, co-opting NGO resource flows into regime patronage networks (Lavers, 2024; Toepler et al., 2020; Heiss, 2019). Another commonly-articulated element of the argument is that even where aid resources are spent on priorities which would seem not to be captured in regime patronage networks, aid enables

such activities through its fungibility. By funding ‘legitimate’ activities through aid, donors enable regimes to increase spending on areas they would see as ‘illegitimate’, such as providing patronage to allies (Baissa and Cammett, 2022; Heurlin, 2020).

A second popular argument is that aid increases authoritarian regimes’ capacity in their efforts to maintain political dominance (von Billerbeck and Tansey, 2019; von Billerbeck et al., 2025; Heurlin, 2020; Autesserre, 2014). The most common variant of this is that donor support provided to the security services (military and police) can improve their capacity to repress citizens, especially opposition groups (Anderson and Fisher, 2016; Rolandsen et al., 2021). As with arguments around patronage, aid’s fungibility is relevant here too: for example Baissa and Cammett argue that ‘external fiscal support frees up funds for regimes to invest more in the salaries and materiel of coercive forces’ (Baissa and Cammett, 2022: 2).

Looking beyond the security services, some authors also make more general claims about the consequences of boosting state capacity through aid in authoritarian contexts. Many development interventions, from small scale local NGO projects to major, multi-donor public sector reform schemes, pursue ‘capacity building’ of state institutions either as a principal objective or as a by-product of their activities. However, in contexts where the line between government and state is blurred, improved state capacity can benefit authoritarian incumbent governments, for example through facilitating executive aggrandisement, where the executive is strengthened at the expense of the legislature and judiciary, or through increasing regimes’ capacity to manipulate elections (von Billerbeck and Tansey, 2019; von Billerbeck et al., 2025). Some types of donor projects, such as land registration and decentralisation, are especially vulnerable to manipulation

by regimes and can increase their capacity to monitor and control local populations (Chinigò, 2022; Lavers, 2024; Emmenegger et al., 2011). Meanwhile, donor-funded infrastructure such as roads, railways, and state buildings – often provided with the aim of extending state authority across a territory – has been seen as facilitating greater regime control or predation by officials on citizens (Bachmann and Schouten, 2018; Huda, 2022; Autesserre, 2014: 143-7; Jennings, 2008: 195; see also Schouten et al., 2022).

Thirdly, a number of studies point to ideational pathways by which aid and development projects can contribute to authoritarian political dominance. The most familiar argument is that aid donors can support authoritarian regimes by signalling a permissive environment. If regimes engage in authoritarian practices such as election rigging or violent repression of dissent, and aid donors either stay silent or restrict themselves to mild criticism, this lowers the perceived costs of such practices and thus makes them more likely in future (von Billerbeck et al., 2025; von Billerbeck and Tansey, 2019; Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018; Brown, 2011). However there are also other ways in which international development agencies' actions, or inactions, can have symbolic meanings which impact on regime dominance. For example, studies of NGOs in authoritarian regimes argue that, by complying with regimes' sometimes onerous bureaucratic requirements and publicly acknowledging regime authority, NGOs reaffirm the existing order (Lorch and Bunk, 2017: 990). Another argument is that NGOs can repeat and reinforce regimes' legitimating narratives. While this is often made in connection with 'regime-loyal' NGOs (see Toepler et al., 2020), the fact that many authoritarian regimes justify themselves using developmentalist narratives suggests that a wider range of both donor and NGO projects may contribute to legitimating regimes by repeating and

reinforcing these narratives – as Jennings (2008) demonstrates for the concept of *ujamaa* in Tanzania.

The idea that development discourses can have legitimating effects for states as well as development agencies dates back to the 1990s and post-structuralist critiques of aid. In several influential studies, arguments were made that 'the texts and words of development' act to 'construct the world as an unruly terrain requiring management and intervention' (Crush, 1995a: 3; see also Crush, 1995b; Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995). This insight was taken on in studies of development from the disciplines of anthropology and history. These studies showed how development discourse justifies development interventions, and reinforces the hierarchical divide between the 'bringers' and 'receivers' of development (Ferguson, 1994; Ghosh, 1994; Crewe and Harrison, 1998; Pigg, 1993, 1997; Cooper, 1997; Hodgson, 2000; Fairhead and Leach, 2000; Hodge, 2007; see also Mitchell, 2002). This literature demonstrates that development projects do not necessarily need to refer to specific regime legitimating narratives in order to reinforce regime political dominance. Simply invoking 'development' can potentially confer legitimacy on the regime as its bringer. However, much of this work downplayed or elided distinctions between external development agencies and host states.[10] Development discourse was perceived as legitimating expertise in the abstract, with little attention as to whether an incumbent government could use this to increase its political dominance.[11]

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[10] In historical studies set in the colonial era, of course, this distinction is less relevant – though there were also differences between 'experts' sent from colonial capitals and officials stationed in particular localities.

[11] There are some partial exceptions to this – notably Ferguson (1994), who argues that the Thaba-Tseka project in Lesotho enhanced the presence of the incumbent regime in a strategically important region by

Finally, a fourth category of studies make the argument that projects can legitimate regimes due to what has been called 'performance' or 'output' legitimacy. The argument here is that by improving the extent or quality of services available to the population, projects can contribute to legitimating the regime. The majority of these studies concern themselves with the role of donors or NGOs in legitimating the *state*, which is usually seen as desirable. Recent examples have generally tended to find that foreign aid and NGO service delivery projects have either null or small positive effects on state legitimacy (Blair and Roessler, 2021; Baldwin and Winters, 2020; Mcloughlin, 2019; Dietrich et al., 2018; Brass, 2016). A smaller number of studies have made the more specific argument that increasing the quality of services in an authoritarian state may legitimate the *regime* (Springman, 2022; Toepler et al., 2020; Lorch and Bunk, 2017).

A critical factor in determining whether projects can legitimate regimes through this mechanism is whether the regime can claim credit for the improved services provided by the donor or NGO. While this is seen as context-dependent, several recent studies find that states or regimes succeed in claiming such credit (Springman, 2022; Blair and Roessler, 2021; Baldwin and Winters, 2023; Dietrich et al., 2018; Brass, 2016). For many authors, this is linked to the fact that people often have low expectations of the state or regime and are grateful for any improvement in services. A number of studies also suggest that people see NGOs and development projects as a component part of the governing apparatus, without distinguishing in a significant way between state and non-state. Jennifer Brass makes this argument in the context of Kenya; she suggests NGOs

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constructing roads and an 'administrative centre' that ultimately housed the army and a prison. However Ferguson's argument also focuses primarily on how development discourse legitimates intervention in the abstract.

in the country can be ‘Surrogates for Government’ (Brass, 2010; see also Jennings, 2008) and are ‘part of the de facto organisational makeup of the state’ (Brass, 2016: 3).

This brief survey has outlined the arguments that have been made about how development projects contribute to authoritarian rule. As noted in the introduction, the different mechanisms set out here have rarely been brought together in a single account. One partial exception to this is von Billerbeck et al.’s *United Nations Peacekeeping and the Politics of Authoritarianism* (2025). Despite the book’s focus on peacekeeping rather than NGO or donor projects, it is relevant to this thesis because it brings together and theorises two distinct mechanisms through which international interventions can contribute to authoritarian rule: enhancing regimes’ capacity and signalling a permissive environment. However, it puts patronage and state capacity as part of the same mechanism, it misses out some important potential effects (for example those connected to the construction of state buildings), and does not seek to illuminate interventions’ longer-term effects after they close. This points to the need to a more specific theorisation of the connections between development projects and authoritarian rule over the long term. This will be developed in the next section, but before doing so, I briefly consider studies which have investigated the possibility that aid may have weakened authoritarian rule.

Possible counter-mechanisms?

Generally, there have been few arguments linking development aid to *reductions* in regimes’ political dominance in recent years. In the earlier econometric literature on aid and democracy, three causal mechanisms were commonly suggested. Firstly, some

studies referred to ideas from the modernization theory of the 1950s and 60s, which hypothesised that if aid increased economic growth and literacy, this in turn should increase demand for democratic government, especially from a newly-empowered middle class. However little evidence was found for this (Knack, 2004), and the lack of democratic transition in many countries experiencing fast economic growth in recent decades has largely discredited this argument.

A second possible mechanism was donors' use of conditionality. As donors from democratic countries would withhold (or threaten to withhold) aid from countries which infringed democratic norms, it was theorised that aid should promote democratisation. While some studies found support for this idea (for example Bermeo, 2011), findings were not widely replicated. In general, donors' use of conditionality has been found to be inconsistent in application and effect. While there were some examples of conditionality being linked to democratic change in the 1990s, for example in Malawi and Kenya, even at this time, there were also plenty of counter examples where it had proved ineffective (Resnick and van de Walle, 2013: 34-6; see also Fisher, 2015). In recent years studies have been more likely to highlight donors' silence or insipid response to various instances of rigged elections, repression of protests and other infringements of democracy and human rights (von Billerbeck et al., 2025; Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018).

The third argument is that aid might promote democracy via diffusion of knowledge and norms. This argument is most commonly made for aid targeted at democracy, including support for civil society organisations (especially those which campaign for democracy and human rights), as well as technical assistance for example to support electoral commissions, election monitors, and political parties. Of the three mechanisms

reviewed here, this is currently the most widely accepted. A recent systematic review found that of 32 studies on the effect of ‘democracy aid’ on democratic outcomes, 26 found a positive impact, 9 a negative impact, and 5 delivered null results (Gisselquist et al., 2021). However it is worth noting that even if democracy aid can be effective, many regimes have for some time placed restrictions on this kind of activity or prohibited it altogether (see for example Carothers, 2016).

In a similar vein, some authors suggest that diffusion of democratic knowledge and norms may apply to aid which is not targeted specifically at democracy (Cole, 2022). In support of this idea, a recent special issue has investigated the possibility that NGOs engaged in service delivery may foster democratization, for example through providing spaces for freer public debate or educating people about their basic rights (Moldavanova et al., 2023; Herrold and AbouAssi, 2023). This remains relatively underexplored, but any arguments about aggregate aid having this kind of effect are still subject to the wider inconclusive findings on aid’s effects on democracy.

Finally, outside of the arguments in the econometric literature, a number of studies from within the history and anthropology of development have indicated that aid might provoke a political challenge to incumbent governments. Frederick Cooper’s work on the origins of development aid in colonial Africa has stressed how in the 1940s and 50s, trade union and political leaders could refer to the new ideas of development to make claims on the metropole for economic resources or political voice. Development could be seen as ‘a rejection of the fundamental principles of colonial rule, a firm assertion of people of all races to participate in global politics and lay claim to a globally defined standard of living’ (Cooper, 1997: 84; see also Cooper, 2010: 14).

Anthropology and history provide a rich hunting ground for cases where development projects and programmes inspired rebellions against incumbents – both in colonial and post-colonial contexts. For example, Hodgson (2000) and Fairhead and Leach (2000) provide examples of colonial development projects which provoked anti-colonial resistance. Tania Li gives a fascinating account of how a group of farmers occupied parts of a National Park in Indonesia in 2001-03, using the rhetoric of economic development and pointing to failed improvement programmes as they tried to justify their actions (Li, 2007: 156-91). In a comparable vein, Dinesh Paudel has argued that projects to strengthen education and agricultural development in a remote region of Nepal, which were intended by the government and the United States to stave off communism, were in fact instrumental in provoking the Maoist revolution in 1996 (Paudel, 2016). However, these rich case studies have so far not been combined with an analysis which puts forward a particular causal mechanism which might explain when projects can provoke such a political challenge.

Having reviewed the arguments for causal links between development projects and authoritarian political dominance in the existing literature, the rest of this chapter now puts forward a conceptual framework which integrates these arguments into a coherent whole. It begins with an analysis of how regimes seek to maintain political dominance, before moving on to conceptualise how development projects influence these dynamics.

Regimes' strategies for political dominance

In order to understand how development projects contribute to authoritarian political dominance, we first need to understand how regimes attempt to achieve such dominance.

The literature on authoritarian rule provides several different typologies for regimes' dominance strategies. For many authors, the key distinction is between strategies of 'repression', which punish those who oppose or criticise the regime, and 'co-optation', which distribute benefits to strategic groups in order to secure their loyalty or quiescence. In an influential contribution, Gerschewski (2013) added 'legitimation' as a third 'pillar of stability' for regimes, alongside repression and co-optation. Slater and Fenner (2011), looking specifically at the role of state power in maintaining authoritarian durability, consider four mechanisms: coercion, revenue extraction, systems for 'registering citizens', and cultivating dependence. Goodfellow and Jackman (2023b) distinguish between 'repressive' and 'generative' strategies, but complicate this binary by presenting five types of dominance strategy which may be either repressive, generative, or both: violent coercion, coercive distribution, co-optation, legal manoeuvres, and legitimising discourses. In what follows below, I draw on all these to develop a typology of the strategies regimes use for dominance which are amenable to influence from development projects.

For the purposes of the analysis here, I will suggest that three strategies for dominance are most relevant: *violent coercion*, the *use of resources as incentives*, and *legitimating narratives*. There are two reasons for selecting these strategies. Firstly, they capture the main, everyday strategies regimes use to maintain their political dominance in particular local contexts. Whilst there are other strategies which do not sit comfortably within these three (for example changes to laws or efforts to register citizens), these are only relevant in a subset of cases. Secondly, development projects are likely to have effects on all three strategies. While certain types of development projects may impact on regimes' other

strategies, such as land registration projects, these are special cases. The intention here is to think through the most significant ways in which most development projects influence authoritarian dominance.

The most important dynamic in determining the strategies of regimes to secure political dominance is the relationship between the regime and other social groups, such as powerful national elites, locally-significant groups such as clan chiefs, businesspeople or landowners, and ordinary citizens. These groups face a decision on the degree of support they want to give the regime – for example, whether to support it vocally and publicly, to acquiesce in silence, or to oppose it. Key factors impinging on this decision are: their genuine belief in the regime's legitimacy, its right to rule; an array of material incentives and disincentives that follow from supporting or resisting the regime; and the probability of imprisonment or bodily harm in the case of opposition. Regime strategies therefore seek to influence groups' calculations in favour of supporting the regime through strategies of violent coercion, the use of resources as incentives and legitimating narratives. These strategies are not mutually exclusive and are generally used in parallel.

Violent coercion is defined as the use of force, or the threat of it, to generate fear, subservience, and acquiescence (following Goodfellow and Jackman, 2023b: 33). As is often pointed out in the literature on authoritarianism, it is not always necessary for violence to be enacted for this strategy to be effective; in order to convince groups in the population not to oppose the regime publicly, the threat of threat of violence is often enough. Many authoritarian regimes rely on the state security apparatus (police and military) to confront, arrest or intimidate their opponents (Bellin, 2004; Albertus and Menaldo, 2012). In rural contexts, where the case study in this thesis is located, action by

the formal security services may be supplemented by local party members or militias with a looser affiliation to the regime. The extent to which the regime controls these groups is therefore an important determinant of whether strategies of violent coercion will be effective. Another important element underpinning strategies of violent coercion is surveillance. A detailed understanding of which individuals and groups are expressing opposition to the regime enables strategies of violent coercion to be more targeted and effective; and widespread surveillance (or presumed surveillance) can also contribute directly to a climate of fear of the regime.

The *use of resources as incentives* refers to all efforts by the regime to achieve political dominance through deploying resources in the population, including by distributing them to or withholding them from certain individuals and groups. This category includes forms of *co-optation*, where resources such as bribes, contracts, or lucrative jobs are provided, in exchange for loyalty, to strategic groups which are either already regime allies, or which might pose a threat to the regime. It also incorporates strategies of *coercive distribution*, in which regimes use mass distribution of resources to cultivate dependence in the wider population (Albertus et al., 2018). Provision of state benefits, such as social protection, agricultural inputs, or even healthcare services, to ordinary citizens can make it more likely that they will support the regime; those who are considering public expressions of discontent or resistance can be threatened with having such benefits withheld. Where populations are dependent on such benefits, these threats can be very effective. However, if populations are economically independent from the regime, strategies of coercive distribution may not function as well. Again, such strategies depend to a

significant extent on surveillance; a regime which 'knows' its citizens will be able to use coercive distribution more effectively.

Regimes cannot achieve political dominance through violent coercion and the provision of material incentives alone. They also need to convince at least some people that their rule is legitimate (Gerschewski, 2013; Dukalskis, 2017; von Soest and Grauvogel, 2017). For this they turn to an array of different *legitimating narratives* which justify their rule. Some attempt to draw on the legitimacy conferred by elections, despite their questionable nature (Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018). Many narratives are particular to the state and its history – for example those which emphasise the role of the regime in liberating the country from its previous oppressors. However, beyond these, some types of narratives are common across a wide range of contexts. Goodfellow and Jackman (2023b: 42-5) set out three: populism (anti-elite rhetoric combined with an appeal to the masses, usually deployed by a charismatic individual leader); securitization (a claim to deliver safety and security for citizens, in the face of perceived high levels of conflict and/or crime); and developmentalism (the claim to be delivering economic growth, reductions in poverty, or improvements in welfare). Of these three, developmentalism is especially relevant to this study of the effects of development projects on authoritarian rule. I provide more detail on developmentalist narratives below.

In practice, these three strategies are often deeply intertwined. For example, many legitimating narratives are directly linked to the other two strategies. Narratives of securitization are used to justify violent coercion. Narratives of developmentalism are often invoked in connection with strategies of co-optation or coercive distribution. More generally, regimes pursue all three strategies to differing extents simultaneously with local

populations, for example using a combination of coercive distribution and violent coercion to discipline particular groups which are seen as posing a threat to the regime. The next section now turns to the vital importance of the state apparatus in implementing all three strategies in authoritarian contexts.

The role of the state in regime dominance strategies

This thesis follows Slater and Fenner in seeing 'state power' as a critical element in authoritarian regimes' 'staying power' (Slater and Fenner, 2011; see also Seeberg, 2021; Hanson, 2017). Translated into the terms used in this thesis, authoritarian regimes' political dominance is frequently underpinned by the apparatus of the state: its ministries and agencies, its buildings and vehicles, its civil servants, police officers, soldiers, teachers and various others. Strategies of violent coercion are often implemented by police and military officers, organised by senior local officials and informed by surveillance carried out by intelligence agencies and other state functionaries. Strategies involving the use of resources as incentives are similar: co-optation may involve the formal awarding of state contracts or state jobs to regime allies, while coercive distribution relies on intelligence-informed selection of beneficiaries in state social security programmes. Regime legitimating narratives are often broadcast by state media companies and propagated at the local level by state functionaries, from teachers to local government officials.

The extent to which the regime can use the state apparatus in this way, however, varies from one context to another. Two factors in particular are important in determining whether the regime can rely on the state to support its dominance strategies. The first is the state's

infrastructural power, or the extent to which it has the logistical capacity to have political decisions implemented throughout its territory (Mann, 1984). As Slater and Fenner put it, in order for the state apparatus to be useful to regimes, it needs to be effective in implementing central directives (2011: 19). A strong state – a state with high infrastructural power – is more useful to a regime than a weak or factionalised one. For example, corruption in a state bureaucracy is only useful to a regime if it has full control of such corruption; a free-for-all in which anyone can successfully bribe officials does not support authoritarian political dominance.

State infrastructural power is in turn underpinned by state *reach* – the presence and visibility of the state apparatus across the territory (Shue, 1988; Purdeková, 2011). Through constructing various state offices and other buildings, and connecting these through roads, railway networks and telecommunications systems; and simultaneously through developing human systems such as hierarchical bureaucracies, postal services and surveillance networks, states establish their presence nearer to citizens and enhance their capacity to implement central decisions in previously remote areas (Mann, 1984; Herbst, 2014; Van de Walle and Scott, 2011; Bachmann and Schouten, 2018). Positioning state officials in rural areas is important for states as it lessens their dependence on intermediaries such as local clan chiefs or warlords (Fairhead, 1992: 24). State reach does not only assist central state actors with implementing policy; the presence of state offices and officials across a territory also makes the state more visible to citizens,

providing a physical representation of the state and enabling it to 'broadcast' its authority over larger distances (Herbst, 2014).[12]

The second factor determining whether the state apparatus will assist a regime to maintain its dominance is the extent of regime control over the state, or put another way, the extent of officials' loyalty to the regime. In many authoritarian regimes, especially single-party systems, divisions between ruling party and state are blurred (Lewis, 2006). Nonetheless, the precise understanding of relations between party and state can vary. Officials may, or may not, regard it as a core part of their role to support the ruling party, for example by campaigning for it at election time, directing the imprisonment of those who speak out against the party or taking them off distribution lists for state social security programmes. This can depend on officials' understanding of the legitimacy of the regime, the consequences for them of not defending it, and also the degree of surveillance exercised by the party over state officials. A highly developed party architecture can often assist a regime in maintaining control over the state apparatus, especially where this mirrors the architecture of the state.

Having set out regimes' strategies for political dominance, and the importance of the state architecture in underpinning these strategies, the next section now turns to the role played by international development projects in these dynamics – and how these play out over the long term, both during project implementation and after projects close.

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[12] I understand state reach as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the achievement of state infrastructural power. If state infrastructural power is to be fully achieved, it requires more than simply increasing the spatial reach of the state through the presence of state offices and officials across a territory. In addition to this, central state leaders need to ensure that lower ranking officials across the territory comply with central directives.

International development projects' effects on authoritarian political dominance

The survey of the literature above set out a range of mechanisms by which international development projects have been conceptualised as influencing authoritarian rule. This chapter draws on these analyses but also goes beyond them, by linking the role of projects to an understanding of authoritarian regimes' strategies for political dominance; by bringing together several different mechanisms; and by including analysis of projects' longer-term consequences after they close.

I suggest that projects influence authoritarian political dominance in three main ways. Firstly, projects *build structures* such as roads, state offices, schools and clinics. These can increase state reach, which can in turn facilitate regime dominance through enhancing officials' ability to propagate regime legitimating narratives, use resources as incentives and potentially also to facilitate violent coercion. Secondly, projects *distribute resources*, including money and in-kind handouts such as clothes, seeds or farm animals. If these are captured by regime actors, they can be brought into strategies of using resources as incentives. Thirdly, development agency staff use particular *legitimation practices* in order to win over sceptical local populations. Two practices are especially prevalent: strategic alignment (public communication that the project is operating under regime authority and in collaboration with the regime) and use of developmentalist narratives. Both of these can potentially bolster the regime's own legitimating narratives, especially if these are based around bringing development. While these mechanisms have been separated for analytical clarity, they should not be seen as operating independently. Links between the mechanisms are presented throughout the thesis.

These three mechanisms represent a selection from the wider set of mechanisms identified in the literature. The rationale for selecting these three in particular is to capture the main ways in which most regular development projects can influence authoritarian political dominance. I am looking to understand the effects of individual international development projects, rather than foreign aid in general. This means that, for example, arguments about high level signalling from foreign donors following national-level human rights abuses are less relevant here, although as will be seen, individual development projects also convey signals about attitudes of interveners towards host governments and these will be part of the analysis.

Another guiding principle has been to locate the kinds of effects that most, if not all, projects will have. This has meant not concentrating unduly on effects limited to specific kinds of project – such as military aid, land registration projects, service delivery projects, or even projects intended to bolster autocratic rule (Tansey, 2016a: 23-54). All these projects have important effects on authoritarian political dominance; many of these effects will be captured under the framework developed here, but they may also have additional effects that are specific to their type of project only, which are not targeted for dedicated analysis because to do so would make the framework unwieldy.

The analysis seeks to be as concrete as possible about the detailed steps that link project activities to authoritarian regimes' political dominance and the strategies that underpin it. This is why the mechanisms below start from an analysis of what projects *do* – the structures they build, the money and other resources they distribute, and how their staff present and perform their work. Rather than attempting to look directly at abstract outcomes of projects such as whether they build state capacity or increase performance

legitimacy, I focus instead on who projects provide money to, who gets trained, where structures are built and so on, and how these played into regime strategies for dominance. I then complement this with an analysis of how residents in the area of implementation understood what happened, and the frameworks they used to explain this.

Finally, the analysis seeks to focus attention on the kinds of effects of projects that are still discernible a decade after project closure. This explains the focus on built structures, which are often the longest-living legacies of projects, sometimes surviving even in areas where few people remain (Grandin, 2009). It also explains the focus on memories, as these are what remain in people's minds after projects have closed. Flows of resources are not so directly visible a decade after project closure, but they are sufficiently tangible that they can be traced through interviews and archives more easily than abstract outcomes such as the quality of services. The below analysis presents each mechanism in detail.

First Mechanism: Building Structures

A huge number of development projects build physical structures such as roads, schools and hospitals. Infrastructure has long been a major component of international development schemes, from colonial railway construction to World Bank-financed dams of the postwar years and, more recently, huge ports built under the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Many projects which are not labelled as infrastructure projects also build physical structures: for example, health projects build clinics; water projects renovate water and sewerage systems; justice projects build courts; public sector reform projects

renovate government buildings. Considered more broadly, almost all international development projects involve some form of construction. Even if development projects do not involve construction as a 'project output', they often require the construction of offices and residences for their own staff to work in – thus shaping the built environment in their areas of operation for years after they close.

Project-built structures can contribute to regimes' dominance strategies in two main ways. Firstly, they can enhance state reach. New or newly-renovated structures built by development projects such as roads, government offices, schools, and health clinics can increase the presence of officials in areas that were previously remote from the political centre. For example, an improved road may mean that officials can access certain areas more easily, using regular cars, motorbikes or buses, instead of on foot or using expensive four-wheel-drive vehicles. This allows more officials to visit these areas more frequently than was previously possible. Improved facilities in rural areas (such as better-quality government offices, school blocks, staff residences, and transport connections) not only make it easier for staff there to carry out their jobs; they also help senior or middle-ranking officials to persuade urbanised junior officials to live in these areas as part of local government administrations. This can increase the presence, capability and morale of officials in areas which were previously at the margins of the state apparatus.[13]

As indicated above, state reach can play a vital role in facilitating all three regime dominance strategies. Regimes can use roads built by development projects to move police or soldiers to areas where there is dissent or protest (violent coercion). Government

[13] Although this section focuses on rural areas, similar arguments could apply to more marginalised urban areas where previously poor infrastructure is upgraded.

offices renovated by development agencies can be used to monitor lists of beneficiaries for government schemes to ensure opponents of the regime are excluded (use of resources as incentives). Schools built by development projects can be used to disseminate core regime messages (legitimating narratives).

Building developmental structures does not automatically lead to an increase in regime political dominance. Whether this mechanism functions is likely to depend on whether structures are built for the state, and operate under state authority. Structures are more likely to strengthen regime dominance when officials are able to determine their location and specifications. If donors and NGOs establish a parallel system of separate built structures operating separate services, this is more likely to undermine regime dominance (for analagous arguments, see Hearn, 1998; Sabaratnam, 2017: 59-82).

Whether built structures translate into political dominance will also likely depend on whether officials using them are loyal to the regime. This will be affected by the incentives they face and the extent to which they see upholding the regime as a core part of their role. The ruling party's ability to discipline and control state officials is also relevant here, and this can be affected by the existence of party hierarchies, alongside or integrated with state hierarchies, across the territory. If officials cannot be relied on to implement the regime's priorities, it is less likely that built structures will reinforce regime political dominance.

The second way in which project-built structures can contribute to regime dominance is through conveying a particular image of the state or regime. As noted above, built structures can increase the visibility of the state in areas where people previously had little exposure to it. But built can also contribute more directly to regime legitimating

narratives. For example, regimes which legitimate themselves using narratives of developmentalism can point to ‘modern’ structures such as dams, highways and railways as evidence of the modernity and progress they are bringing (Anand et al., 2018; Terrefe, 2022). Buildings can of course convey other images of the state beyond modernity and development. Police stations can inspire fear; grand government buildings can inspire awe and respect (Gallagher, 2022). Such structures may also be built with support from development agencies.

The extent to which this element of the mechanism operates is not only dependent on buildings’ architectural design and regime propaganda, but on how these structures interact with people in their daily lives and how people interpret them. Non-elites are not obliged to understand buildings as having the meanings regime leaders and officials wish them to convey. Rather, people will evaluate the appearance of built structures alongside other images of the state they may have, as well as their own personal experiences and interactions with state institutions and regime officials. Julia Gallagher shows how in South Africa, people contrasted the fine exteriors of major state buildings with the chaotic, ‘corrupt’ or ‘messed up’ insides, constructing an idea of the state as partial and unfinished (Gallagher, 2022: 11; see also Gallagher et al., 2021; Tomkinson et al., 2022).

Also worth noting is that some structures built by donors or NGOs can be seen as reinforcing division and separation between internationals and locals – such as the Mogadishu International Airport Zone or the ‘floating hotels’ built for UN personnel in Timor-Leste (Bakonyi, 2022; Smirl, 2015; Lemay-Hébert, 2011). In contrast to structures built for the state, these kinds of buildings are more likely to invoke ideas of the distinct power and authority of international actors, which may undermine regime dominance.

Project-built structures have a long history after the projects that build them close. Donors and NGOs often intend infrastructure and buildings to enhance long term state capacity; if structures are solidly built and well maintained, and if state officials continue to be subject to party oversight and control, there is no reason why project-built structures should not continue to underpin regime political dominance for decades after project closure. As structures age and weather, their allure as symbols of modernity and progress may wear off, but they may nonetheless continue to contribute to regime legitimating narratives. Alternatively, structures may be neglected and degenerate into development 'ruins.' These may either be abandoned or creatively re-appropriated, in processes through which they acquire new meanings (Gez, 2021; Gez et al., 2022; Schler and Gez, 2018).

Second mechanism: Distributing Resources

If most development projects build structures of some kind, virtually all projects involve the distribution of resources. Even if projects only spend money on their own staff, or use volunteers, they cannot avoid transferring resources to certain individuals. Most projects have much larger budgets which include payments for activities such as vaccinations, training courses, or expert visits; purchase of goods such as medicines, computers, vehicles, or agricultural machinery; payments to implementing partners such as governments, (other) NGOs, or private contractors; and of course, staff salaries and allowances.

Alongside these formally budgeted expenditures, development projects can also contribute more indirectly to local economies in their areas of implementation. As studies

of the ‘peacekeeping economy’ illustrate, international interventions (whether peacekeeping missions or development projects) also encourage various forms of economic activity that would not happen, or would happen at a much lower scale, without the international presence (Jennings and Bøås, 2015: 282). This includes direct employment opportunities with international agencies, unskilled and informal work that locals do for individual internationals (for example cleaning, cooking, and guarding); jobs in establishments and businesses that cater to internationals; and the sex industry.

The resources distributed by development projects have significant potential to support regime political dominance, as they may become integrated with regime patronage networks, contributing both to co-optation and coercive distribution. Regimes may succeed in diverting funds from aid projects away from their intended purposes, using them to reward allies and co-opt elite groups which would otherwise pose a threat to the regime (Andersen et al., 2022; de Waal, 2015). Alternatively, they may use project resources to support co-optation in more subtle ways, for example ensuring that contracts under development projects are awarded to key regime allies (Briggs, 2015; Bak and Moon, 2016). Another potential for co-optation is when regimes influence NGO and donors’ decisions on which geographical areas to work in, giving priority to their political base, or to strategic areas that have recently become allied to the regime (Briggs, 2012, 2014; Jablonski, 2014).

Regimes can also enrol international development projects’ resources in strategies of coercive distribution. Through controlling the resource flows of development projects, regimes can ensure these are used to discipline dissent among citizens, promote party membership and encourage voting for the ruling party (Chinigò, 2022: 71-114; Heurlin,

2020; Jablonski, 2014). Importantly, this can function not only in cases where resources are directly routed through government financial systems, but also where projects are managed by NGOs or other implementers – as long as regimes are able to exert sufficient control over the operations of such projects, for example by vetting lists of beneficiaries (Lavers, 2024: 244).

Whether this mechanism acts to strengthen regime political dominance or not is expected to depend on the extent of regime control over projects' resource distribution practices. This is in turn related to two factors. The first is whether local state officials act reliably in regime interests, ensuring that aid projects' resources are distributed in line with regime priorities rather than via their own personalised – or broader clan or ethnic group – patronage networks. This is often challenging for regimes. In China (Ang, 2016) and, to some extent Bangladesh under the later years of Awami League rule (Lewis and Hossain, 2022) regimes were more or less successful in imposing central control on resource allocation decisions, preventing local officials from developing too much personal authority distinct from the regime. However, in Somalia, the regime was unable to discipline officials and logistics rents – including from foreign aid – proliferated among various different groups, significantly undermining regime political dominance (Elder, 2022). The second factor is the extent of control officials achieve over NGO or donor project resources. In some contexts, NGOs are left to operate more or less without supervision, whereas in others they are supervised extremely closely. The degree to which NGOs or donors seek to co-operate with regimes is also relevant here: some NGOs seek as much autonomy from regimes as they can, while others work much more closely with officials.

Another consideration which is relevant especially to the element of the mechanism on coercive distribution is the scale of dependence of people on the state. If people depend on the state for essential elements of their livelihood – for example, if many people rely on state social security programmes, or perhaps for the middle class in an area the state is the only significant employer – the threat of withdrawal from access to these resources will have a significant effect (see Heurlin, 2020). If, however, there are groups which have access to significant resources which are not subject to state control, coercive distribution may have less effect on these people. For example, if there is a strong rural elite with access to abundant land and which does not depend on the state for the ability to exploit this land, this group may be able to resist efforts by the regime to incentivise behaviour change through coercive distribution.[14]

Of the three mechanisms, this is perhaps the one whose long-term effects are least obvious. When projects close, their resource flows dry up. However, resources transferred during project implementation can and do have longer term consequences. For example, one aspect of the potential link between aid flows and patronage which is relatively under-explored is the permanent transfer of resources when projects phase out. Many projects hand over vehicles, computers, and various other resources – alongside buildings – to governments at the time of their closure. Additionally, patterns of resource distribution can leave longer term legacies. For example, if projects transfer a large volume of resources to a particular ethnic group or subgroup during project

[14] This analysis draws on Catherine Boone's framework for understanding social structure in African rural communities. Boone focuses attention on the circumstances that make rural elites constitute weak allies, weak rivals, strong allies or strong rivals to the state (Boone, 2003: 20-30).

implementation, that group can invest those resources in ways that strengthen their political position for many years afterwards.

Third mechanism: Legitimation practices

In contrast to the previous two mechanisms' focus on built structures and material resources, the third mechanism concerns projects' ideational effects. As noted earlier in this chapter, international development agencies need to legitimate their activities (or gain social acceptance) with communities that can often be sceptical about their intentions. The practices agencies use to legitimate their work can in turn feed into regime legitimating narratives. All external interventions, from development projects to peacekeeping operations and international administrations, engage in legitimation practices, which can range from deliberate, formalised strategies to more subconscious elements of the way individual staff engage with particular populations.

Agencies can make use of a wide range of different legitimation practices; in her study of NGOs in Tanzania, Kathy Dodworth (2022) refers to six. In order to keep the analysis simple, I here review two common practices: strategic alignment with the regime, and use of developmentalist narratives. These have been chosen in line with the thesis' focus on everyday actions that almost all projects carry out, and the kinds of effect that are discernible long after projects close. I draw a distinction between legitimating *narratives*, which are discursive claims about the legitimacy of a regime or another social group, and a wider set of legitimation *practices*. Legitimation practices include the deployment of legitimating narratives but also other actions which are intended to cultivate legitimacy but are not linked to a specific discursive claim – such as strategic alignment.

Many international projects look to gain legitimacy through strategic alignment. This involves actors seeking to gain legitimacy by emphasising their connections with, or approval from, other actors who have already established legitimacy with a particular group. For international development agencies, often a first step towards gaining social acceptance from sceptical local populations is to emphasise that their activities have been approved by the government. International development agencies are also frequently pushed towards acknowledging links with government through the legal and regulatory restrictions they face. In many contexts, especially in authoritarian regimes which are often sceptical of the role of external agencies, NGOs and foreign donors face bureaucratic requirements for example to report to the regime, acknowledge the role of government in public, or submit to inspection or evaluation by officials. All these practices can contribute to the naturalisation of regimes' authority, by acknowledging the regime as holding the capacity to approve or disapprove of external agencies' activity (Lorch and Bunk, 2017: 990; Froissart, 2014).

There is a wide repertoire of acts that can convey NGOs' or donors' strategic alignment with the regime. At a most basic level, compliance with bureaucratic requirements can indicate acceptance or at least tolerance of the regime, even on the part of advocacy groups. Beyond this, development agencies can more proactively indicate their connections with government through joint public appearances. Just as incoming visits by heads of state can help solidify regime authority by indicating that the regime has powerful allies and is respected internationally (Tansey, 2016a: 70), visits from development ministers, senior donor officials, heads of NGOs or – in rural areas – less

senior visitors from capitals or foreign countries can convey a similar sense of the regime's international connections which can contribute to its legitimating narratives.

On a more day-to-day basis, staff from NGOs can emphasise connections to regimes by carrying out joint visits with officials to local communities, for example sharing transport; NGO staff can help government colleagues by passing on messages that are part of government campaigns (such as on hand washing or vaccination); and NGO training courses can be carried out jointly with government, for example using officials as trainers. In some cases, NGO staff may take up positions on government committees at local level (Dodworth, 2022: 95). Strategic alignment can also be reinforced in written communications, for example through joint branding on buildings or vehicles, or the use of government letters for NGO communications with communities.

While a certain degree of acknowledgement of regimes' authority on the part of international development agencies is unavoidable (for example compliance with bureaucratic requirements), they do face choices about exactly how closely to align themselves with regimes. A classic distinction that is often made is between service delivery NGOs, which are frequently seen as partnering with governments, and advocacy NGOs which tend to develop more antagonistic relations (Toepler et al., 2020; Heiss, 2019; Dodworth, 2022: 91-117). It is logical that NGOs which choose to align themselves with regimes are likely to bolster their dominance and those which choose not to align are more likely to undermine it. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that there are various gradations of alignment, whether an NGO is involved in service delivery, advocacy or both.

The second common legitimation practice is the use of developmentalist narratives. As set out above, many regimes seek to gain legitimacy through claims that they are bringing modernity and development to citizens. Developmentalist narratives, as noted in the brief discussion of post-structuralist critiques of aid earlier, legitimate the role of outsiders who bring development to the people. Various studies have emphasised that development is bound up with a concept of trusteeship, where external actors act for or on behalf of a certain population, seeking to develop their capacities for their own good, but often without their explicit consent (Cowen and Shenton, 1996; Li, 2007; Dodworth, 2022). In line with this concept of trusteeship, developmentalist narratives position local people as ignorant and in need of education, while outsiders are positioned as experts who have specialist knowledge which will assist citizens to improve their own lives.

Development agencies' use of these narratives can support regime political dominance in two ways. Firstly, agencies can repeat specific regime legitimating narratives, amplifying developmentalist concepts developed by regimes such as *ujamaa* under President Nyerere in Tanzania (Jennings, 2008) or the developmental state in Ethiopia (Brown and Fisher, 2020), and giving them credence domestically and internationally. Secondly, and more subtly, by using development language, they can legitimise the role of outsiders in general, and the regime in particular, as the natural source and bringer of development. In repeating these narratives development agencies can imply that citizens cannot develop themselves and that they need to look to the state to help them to lead more modern, comfortable lives.

Whether this mechanism operates is linked both to the positioning of international development agencies and the frameworks of meaning within which narratives are

received and understood. As with the mechanism on strategic alignment, development agencies have an element of choice about how far to associate themselves with regime narratives. While some may accept and defend concepts such as the developmental state, others may be much more cautious and attempt to avoid using these and other regime concepts.

Regarding the more general use of the idea of development, international development agencies by the nature of their work will usually need to justify this using developmentalist narratives of some kind. But even here there is a choice between what Kathy Dodworth calls 'taking state-led development to the people' or 'taking people-led development to the state' (Dodworth, 2022: 93). Donors and NGOs which focus on service delivery and welfare tend to emphasise their partnership and joint role with state actors in bringing expertise and resources to local communities ('taking state-led development to the people'). It seems likely that these would strengthen regime political dominance. However, some NGOs, especially those which are advocacy-focused or work on issues such as transparency and accountability, emphasise their credentials as representing the people, mediating local 'demand' to realise particular rights, if necessary in opposition to state actors ('taking people-led development to the state').[15] These types of developmentalist narratives are less likely to support regimes' dominance and may weaken it.

Alongside NGOs and donors' positioning, the operation of the mechanism is also dependent on local understandings of states, governments, and development. Agencies'

[15] Even in taking this position, such NGOs often cannot avoid positioning themselves as trustees for local people, for example highlighting their superior advocacy skills, legal knowledge, or international links.

performances and uses of language will not be received the same everywhere; they will depend on the particular frameworks of meaning in which they are deployed. For example, people may understand the state as powerful, weak, unified, fragmented, a benevolent patron, a neutral arbiter of justice, a predator, a corrupt mess, or a mixture of several of the above. While some ideas and images of the state are common to many contexts, others can be quite specific to particular times and places (Mulugeta, 2020). Similarly, people's perceptions of NGOs and donors can be influenced significantly by their previous experiences and by pre-existing narratives about them. They can be seen as tirelessly working to improve people's lives, or as corrupt actors interested only in enriching themselves. All these perceptions can contribute to the way in which particular narratives are received and understood.

Although narratives and performances can seem fleeting, as they are enacted only once in a particular time and place, they can live on for a long time through the function of memory. While memories are of course fallible, people's recollections of certain events can last for years or even decades. Whether particular experiences are recalled, and the way in which they are recalled, is related to whether there is a strong interest in the information they contain. People remember things that were important to them at the time, or which were seen as important later (Thompson and Bornat, 2017: 205). Memory is labile: each time a memory is recalled, it once again becomes open to change and reconstruction. Remembering the first day of school is actually remembering the last time it was remembered (Thompson and Bornat, 2017: 200). In the context of this thesis, memories of particular events, such as the construction of a well, the opening of a clinic, or an encounter with a government official or staff from a development agency will be

filtered through contemporary interests and concerns. However this does not mean they are necessarily inaccurate. Importantly for this thesis, where encounters are remembered vividly, this indicates that the memories are considered important to the interviewee.

Conclusion

Existing understandings of the influence of development projects on authoritarian political dominance are limited in certain crucial respects. Whilst there have been many insightful studies, so far there have been few which have integrated multiple mechanisms into a single account. Existing studies have also given limited attention to the long-term effects of projects, and few have focused on the perspectives and understandings of ordinary citizens in analysing these dynamics.

This chapter has addressed these limitations by developing a conceptual framework to theorise the mechanisms linking development projects to authoritarian political dominance. I began by outlining three principal strategies used by regimes to achieve political dominance. These are: violent coercion, defined as the use of force, or the threat of it, to generate fear, subservience, and acquiescence; the use of resources as incentives, which includes both co-optation of elite groups and coercive distribution (mass distribution of resources in ways that cultivate dependence on the regime in the population); and the deployment of legitimating narratives which justify regimes' rule. I then set out the important role of the state apparatus in underpinning all three strategies.

I then elaborated three mechanisms by which development projects can be understood to influence authoritarian regimes' political dominance over the long term. Firstly, projects build physical structures such as roads, schools and hospitals. Where these structures

are built in line with regime priorities, they can potentially extend regimes' reach, facilitating the use of violent coercion, use of resources as incentives, and propagation of legitimating narratives throughout the country. They may also improve regimes' image, conveying impressions of modernity and progress. But where project-built structures are part of a separate, non-state system of service delivery they may undermine regime dominance.

Secondly, projects distribute resources and these resource flows may become integrated with regime patronage networks. This can contribute to co-optation, for example where aid funds are used to award contracts to regime allies. It can also contribute to coercive distribution, where project resources become integrated in wider regime strategies of inculcating dependence. If regimes do not succeed in capturing project resource flows, these can potentially bolster the legitimacy or dominance of opposition groups, weakening regime political dominance.

Thirdly, development agencies engage in various practices to legitimate their work. Two common practices include strategic alignment (publicly emphasising their connections with government) and use of developmentalist narratives. Through strategic alignment, agencies can naturalise regimes' authority. Through using developmentalist narratives, agencies can either repeat specific regime legitimating narratives or more generally emphasise the role of the state as a bringer of development. However, agencies which focus on advocacy may rather emphasise their role in channelling local demand towards officials, potentially undermining regime dominance.

Taken as a whole, the framework puts forward a series of proposals which are tested and developed further through the thesis. The mechanisms are put forward as a heuristic,

initial attempt at theorising the links between international development projects and authoritarian regimes' political dominance. Throughout the empirical sections, the proposals are questioned and challenged based on the archives consulted and interviews held. The next chapter begins to apply the framework in the Ethiopian context.

Chapter 4: The EPRDF regime, development agencies and political dominance

This chapter takes the thesis into the specific context of Ethiopia under EPRDF, and also introduces the case of Menschen für Menschen (MfM) and the Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP) in more detail. As noted in the introduction, I will argue that the MIRDP was a 'most likely case' (George and Bennett, 2005) for a development project which would be expected to strengthen a regime's political dominance. This was for two main reasons. Firstly, the EPRDF in Ethiopia exerted a high level of control over development aid, which is widely understood to have been incorporated into EPRDF strategies for political dominance (see Clapham, 2018; Kelsall, 2013; Vaughan and Gebremichael, 2011). Secondly, MfM and the MIRDP were especially likely to strengthen regime dominance compared with other projects in Ethiopia in the same time period. This was because MfM aligned itself closely with EPRDF, built structures which were taken over by the regime, did very little independent service delivery and avoided advocacy work.

The chapter comprises four sections. It begins with an introduction to Ethiopian political history before the EPRDF's ascent to power in 1991. This brief section reviews local government structures and regime dominance strategies in the years before EPRDF, which had a lasting influence after the change of regime. After this, the second section shifts the focus to the EPRDF regime's political dominance strategies in the 1990s and 2000s, with a focus on rural populations. I highlight three key dominance strategies used

by the regime: developing bureaucratic and physical infrastructure as a means of extending regime reach; mass distribution of resources in line with strategies of coercive distribution; and use of developmentalist legitimating narratives. These strategies are mentioned in other literature (for example Lavers, 2024), but I describe them using the terminology developed in the previous chapter. In the third section, I then review the role of development projects in contributing to these EPRDF dominance strategies. The fourth section then introduces the specific case of MfM and the MIRDP.

The focus of the chapter is thematic rather than chronological. In order to assist the reader in following the narrative, I provide a table (Table 1) with key dates in Ethiopian political history alongside key dates for the MIRDP project.

Ethiopia before EPRDF: the imperial regime and the Derg

Ethiopia was ruled by Emperor Haile Selassie from 1930 to 1974, with a brief, but brutal interlude of Italian occupation between 1936 and 1941. Haile Selassie inherited a system of governance that involved rule through the aristocracy, most of whom had their origins in the Amhara highlands. He sought to modernise and centralise governance structures, though the nobility continued to play an important role (Zewde, 2002: 178-227; Clapham, 1988: 26-31). Under Haile Selassie's rule, a system of local government was established where the country was divided into fourteen regions, approximately 100 *awrajas* or provinces and 600 *weredas* or districts (Clapham, 1988: 102).

Date	Key events in Ethiopian political history	Significant moments for MIRDP
1974	Fall of Haile Selassie, beginning of Derg regime	
1988		MIRDP commences initial small-scale operations in Merhabete
1991	Fall of Derg regime, beginning of EPRDF	MIRDP suspends operations, recommencing in 1992
1997	Amhara land reform	
1998-2000	Ethiopia-Eritrea war	
2001	Major internal split in TPLF. PM Meles Zenawi emerges in strengthened position. Development strategy shifts towards capitalism	
2003		Opening of Alem Ketema Enat Hospital. Karlheinz Böhm awarded Ethiopian citizenship by PM Meles
2005	Controversial elections. Opposition initially allowed more freedom but, faced with possible defeat, regime reverts to manipulation and repression	
2007		Main phase of MIRDP concludes. Small scale activities on HIV/AIDS continue
2009		Final end of all MIRDP activity in Merhabete. Evaluation completed
2012	Meles Zenawi dies. Replaced by Hailemariam Dessalegn	
2014		Karlheinz Böhm dies
2016-18	Unrest across Ethiopia especially in Oromo region	
2018	Hailemariam Dessalegn resigns as PM, replaced by Abiy Ahmed	
2019	EPRDF dissolved and replaced by Prosperity Party	
2020-22	Tigray War	

Table 1: Key dates in Ethiopian political history and for the MIRDP, 1974-22

The imperial regime was overthrown in 1974 as part of a military coup. Following a famine and urban unrest, in which student protests played a major part, the lower ranks of the military formed a committee called the *Derg* which took power by stages (Zewde, 2002: 233-5). Over time, Mengistu Hailemariam emerged as the leader of the Derg regime, eliminating his rivals one by one. The Derg was not initially socialist in orientation, but increasingly adopted Marxism-Leninism, partly influenced by the student movement. Although the revolution was initially welcomed by some, the Derg developed a reputation for brutal repression of opposition, and arrest, torture and execution of enemies. It was also criticised for its resettlement and villagization schemes, which involved cases of coercion, high death rates, and escapees (Pankhurst and Piguet, 2009).

For rural areas, one of the most radical acts of the Derg was the land reform of 1975. This nationalised all land, distributing usufruct rights to peasant households and redistributing this every 2–3 years (Lavers, 2024: 71). The implementation of the land reform was entrusted to a network of Peasant Associations across the country which later came to be known as *kebele*. With the blurred boundaries between state and party, the *kebele*'s role quickly evolved to include repression of opposition and 'encadrement' of the population (Clapham, 2002: 14). It also fed back information on 'anti-revolutionary' activities to the party and intelligence services (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003: 41).

What would later become the EPRDF regime started out as an insurgency in the northern Tigray region of Ethiopia. Initially formed in the last days of the imperial regime, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) opposed the dominance of the Amhara under both that regime and the Derg which succeeded it. In order to survive and to win over the

peasantry in Tigray, the TPLF attempted to mobilise them using two main strategies: material distribution and ethnic nationalism (Lavers, 2024: 74-7).

The TPLF sought to take power over all of Ethiopia but faced ideological and practical problems in doing so. Until 1988, the insurgency was confined overwhelmingly to Tigray. As it gathered momentum and met increasing success on the battlefield, TPLF sought to establish sister parties in other ethnic regions of Ethiopia. In Amhara, a coalition was made with the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), an existing rebel group, that was later renamed the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM). While the EPRDF was presented as a coalition of different ethnic nationalities, it was heavily dominated by the TPLF (Fisher, 2020: 61-4).

The EPRDF regime and its strategies for political dominance in rural areas

The EPRDF seized power from the Derg in May 1991. Despite its military dominance, in the early years of the new regime, its leaders were acutely conscious of their political vulnerability, as they had very little political base outside of Tigray. The new regime's strategy to address this involved attempting to apply the mobilisation tactics they had used during the insurgency to the whole population. Firstly, ethnic nationalism was introduced to all regions of Ethiopia through a system of ethnic federalism. This involved the establishment of a new federal structure with the creation of regions based on ethnicity and language and administration in local languages.

Secondly, the regime sought to develop its political base in the peasantry across the country. A 1993 EPRDF document made clear how central the peasantry was to the party both economically and politically:

> Just as the center of our economic development program is the rural part of the country, so, too, the focus of our political work is the peasantry (EPRDF, 1993; cited in Lavers, 2024: 87).

The EPRDF sought to develop political dominance among the entire peasantry. Their strategy in rural areas was therefore not primarily focused on co-optation of local elites, but instead on securing acquiescence, and ideally legitimacy, among the mass of poorer and middle farmers. As the leader of EPRDF and new Prime Minister Meles Zenawi noted, 'in agricultural areas we do not make coalitions with elites: the only coalition we want to make is with the people' (interview, June 1994; cited in Vaughan, 2011: 622).

In the rest of this section, I set out the key strategies that the EPRDF pursued in order to secure political dominance among the mass of the people in rural areas of the country. The account is focused on the regime's strategies in rural areas of what Markakis (2011) has called Ethiopia's 'highland core' (Amhara and Tigray regions), as well as in much of the 'highland periphery' (parts of Oromia and the former Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region, now subdivided into four regions). Different dynamics apply in the 'lowland periphery,' such as in Afar, Somali, Benishangul Gumuz and Gambella regions.

I suggest the EPRDF regime used three key strategies to establish its political dominance in these areas: increasing regime reach through developing physical and bureaucratic infrastructure; distributing resources as a dominance strategy with elements of coercive distribution; and propagating the legitimating narrative of developmentalism.

Although the account draws on the terminology developed in the previous chapter, it is not intended as a reinterpretation and is broadly similar to other accounts.

Increasing regime reach

One of the principal strategies by which the EPRDF sought to achieve and maintain political dominance was by increasing the reach of both state and party deep into rural areas. This process involved two aspects which proceeded simultaneously. Firstly, the regime developed its bureaucratic structures, increasing the number of state and party officials positioned across the country and developing the bureaucratic hierarchies by which they were linked. Secondly, the EPRDF dramatically increased the network of infrastructure and state buildings across the territory, by building roads, offices, clinics, and schools – providing the large numbers of new officials with premises where they could work and the means of moving more easily around the country.

On coming to power in 1991, the EPRDF inherited the *kebele* system developed by the Derg, and over time, deepened it significantly. It introduced a series of sub-*kebele* structures, including *mengistawi budin* (government teams covering 50 households) and *limat budin* (development teams covering 10-15 households), and some time later, 'one-to-five networks' covering five to six households. The introduction of *mengistawi* and *limat budin* dated to the early 2000s; formally at least they were state rather than party structures. They were introduced as part of a massive programme of state 'capacity building' which also focused on improving local officials' qualifications (Vaughan, 2011: 629-31; Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003: 43-4).

In the first decade of the new century the number of officials working in local areas expanded dramatically. From a situation in the 1990s where the relatively small number of *kebele* officials were elected and unpaid, by around 2010 there were paid positions for a *kebele* manager, 3–4 development agents (agricultural extension officers), two health extension workers and schoolteachers in each *kebele*. The number of development agents nationally increased from 2,500 in 1995 to more than 47,500 in 2008, while by 2010, the government had trained 30,000 health extension workers. In total, the number of public employees tripled between 2004/05 and 2013/14, following a more steady increase since the 1990s (all statistics from Lavers, 2024: 107). As part of the 'highland core', Amhara region was an area where these structures were well-embedded and where officials were generally loyal to the regime.

This expansion in the numbers of state functionaries across the country led to a massive increase in state reach; but due to blurred boundaries between state and regime it also increased regime reach. Expanded state structures were mirrored by a parallel and less visible party structure of cadres, officers, and local cells, often involving the same individuals. As an example of the blurred boundaries, Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003: 41) report from their fieldwork in 1998-99 that local official meetings would consider state business first and then move on to party business.

From 2005 onwards the boundaries were blurred still further, reflecting the regime's response to the elections in that year. Elections had been held every five years from 1995, but previously these had been tightly controlled, with little space allowed to opposition parties. In 2005, the EPRDF leadership allowed the opposition much more freedom to campaign, but shortly before polling day realised that they faced possible defeat, and

resorted to repression and manipulation of results. Lefort (2007), based on fieldwork in Amhara, reports that the entire *kebele* and sub-*kebele* leadership, the *mengistawi budin*, the local militia and other party members were given political training and stipends, and tasked with campaigning for EPRDF. This included door-to-door visits to ask people to sign a register committing them to vote for the EPRDF or 'face the consequences' after the elections (Lefort, 2007: 266). After the election, as part of a new political strategy attempting to increase regime dominance in rural areas, the EPRDF also massively expanded party membership. Any *kebele* and sub-*kebele* officials who were not already party members were enrolled *en masse*, alongside a large number of others including 'model farmers' (see below). This ensured that almost all state functionaries at local level would be party members and subject to party, as well as state, directives.

The blurred boundaries between state and party were an element of continuity between the Derg and EPRDF eras (Rahmato, 2009: 325-32). Local officials were tasked with disseminating party narratives, and reporting back instances of dissent, as well as mobilizing people to vote for EPRDF at elections. There were, however, some important differences. Firstly. the number, geographical spread and capacity of local government officials increased dramatically – the reach of the regime now arguably extended to the household level (Emmenegger et al., 2011). Another innovation introduced by EPRDF was *gim gema* (self-evaluation), a technique of centralising control which had its origins in the TPLF insurgency. It involved both party and state functionaries evaluating their own performance in front of superiors, often admitting to failures to meet impossible targets. It provided party officials an opportunity to punish, often selectively, those seen as disloyal

to the party or who promoted alternative viewpoints (Labzaé, 2021; see also Vaughan, 2011: 628; Chanie, 2007: 367; Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003: 134-5).

Another significant divide between Derg and EPRDF periods was the wholesale removal of former Derg cadres from their official positions at the local level (Abate, 2004; Vaughan, 2011; Lefort, 2007, 2010). Shortly after the EPRDF came to power, former local officials were purged from their positions in what was referred to as a 'war on the *birokrasi*' (Vaughan, 2011: 627) – the term *birokrasi* (bureaucracy) was used to refer to all former officials who had been involved in the Derg's systems of control.

Going further than this, in Amhara in 1997 a land reform sought to dispossess so-called *birokrasi* from their land and redistribute it to the *ch'ek'un* (oppressed; in other words, all those who were not either *birokrasi* or so-called 'feudal remnants', former large landowners or members of the aristocracy). The EPRDF sought to capitalise on perceived grievances with the previous regime's systems of oppression, while also attempting to build a class basis for the new regime, by putting an end to the influence of the old peasant leadership, crippling them economically, and establishing a group of loyalists whose interests were linked to the current regime (Ege, 1997: ii). However, the people dispossessed were influential locally and the reforms did not put an end to their influence; in many families, for example, *birokrasi* parents lost land while their children as *ch'ek'un* gained. Also, many ordinary people were connected to the *birokrasi* as kinsmen, neighbours and friends (Ege, 1997: iii). The EPRDF's actions therefore created a new class of people, often young and relatively inexperienced initially, who were loyal to the regime and depended on it for their livelihood. But they also ostracised an influential and

still relatively well-off group of local individuals across the country. This group played an important role in the MIRDP, as will be seen below in the empirical chapters.

In parallel with the expansion in state and party bureaucratic structures, during this period the EPRDF also significantly increased construction of physical infrastructure across the country. This started already in the 1990s but expanded in the 2000s, and became even more dramatic after 2005 as the regime attempted to build a 'developmental state' (see more on this below). For example, the road network more than doubled in extent from 36,496 km in 2004 to 85,966 km in 2013 (Ethiopian Roads Authority, cited in Clapham, 2018: 1163). Through the Health Extension Program, supported with significant donor funds, the number of health posts increased from 6,191 in 2004/05 to 14,192 in 2009/10 – more than doubling the number of health posts in five years, whilst the number of Health Extension Workers increased more than tenfold, from 2,737 to 34,382 (Bilal et al., 2011). Constructing schools was also a major priority for the regime, with the number of elementary schools tripling between 1994 and 2015 (Oh, 2019: 3). Improving communication networks and promoting 'human capital formation' in the form of education and health improvements were vital elements of the regime's strategy to promote economic growth (Clapham, 2018: 1155).

Infrastructure construction also had a political function. In providing improved facilities for newly-trained teachers, health officers and health extension workers, the vast majority of which would have been party members, physical infrastructure also made a significant contribution to the reach of the EPRDF as a party across the Ethiopian territory. As PM Meles Zenawi put it, 'Unlike all previous governments our writ runs in every village… now we have a formally structured state, there is a school in every village and clinics in every

village, roads, infrastructure' (quoted in Dowden, 2012). The link between physical built structures and regime political dominance (the government's 'writ') was very clear.

Increasing EPRDF's reach across rural areas facilitated its strategies for political dominance. Notably, having a vastly increased number of officials in local areas significantly enhanced the regime's ability to use violent coercion to repress dissent. Following the 2005 elections, for example, local opposition figures were arrested and held without trial for months (Lefort, 2010: 441). Some individuals were ordered to become party members and were jailed if they refused (Lefort, 2010: 449). Civil servants found to have made significant transgressions through the *gim gema* process could also end up in jail (Labzaé, 2021). Meanwhile, those who resorted to more overt forms of protest, for example Oromo opposition activists (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003: 54), or opponents of major state agricultural schemes (Regassa and Korf, 2018: 620), faced the risk of beating or even death. Improved roads, which enable the quick movement of officials and security forces, also played a role in facilitating these actions. Beyond this, increased regime reach also significantly enabled the other two dominance strategies: use of resources as incentives and propagating legitimating narratives. These are reviewed in more detail below.

Resource distribution as a dominance strategy

As mentioned above, EPRDF's strategy to secure political dominance in rural areas – particularly in Amhara, Tigray and parts of Oromia – involved seeking a 'coalition with the people'. In these areas, their use of resources as incentives primarily involved mass

distribution schemes, using tactics of coercive distribution (Albertus et al., 2018), rather than co-optation of particular elite groups.

Two particular forms of distribution were especially important. Firstly, agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertiliser, and irrigation: these were part of the EPRDF's economic development strategy in the 1990s, known as Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization. This programme struggled to deliver, with a small number of development agents, problems with seed and fertiliser supply and limited market access. Use of improved agricultural inputs showed hardly any increase during the 1990s, and there was also little expansion of irrigation (Lavers, 2024: 117-18).

In the 2000s, however, there was a major increase in the provision of agricultural inputs. As mentioned previously, the number of development agents increased dramatically in first years of the new century. This was linked to the regime's new approach to agricultural development, following a major split in the senior leadership of the TPLF in 2001 in which PM Meles Zenawi emerged victorious. The government's agricultural strategy shifted at this point towards an explicit focus on promoting capitalism, including through supporting more promising farmers who would demonstrate the benefits of new techniques to their neighbours. These 'model farmers' were referred to in a 2002 government strategy for rural development (Vaughan, 2011: 631) but became more prominent after the 2005 elections, where the regime sought to attract the former *birokrasi* by making them model farmers and simultaneously enrolling them as party members (Lefort, 2010, 2012). Model farmers' access to fertiliser, seeds, and credit was routed through development teams and development agents, who as noted above were also

party members. This meant that farmers were highly dependent on regime structures for their livelihoods (Lavers, 2024: 132).

A second form of distribution by which the regime could increase its political dominance was support for those in need, either due to long term poverty or a specific emergency situation. In the 1990s a number of food-for-work schemes were operated across the country, many financed by international donors such as the World Food Programme. From 2005, these were replaced by the muti-donor Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), which provided cash and food transfers to some eight million people, mostly in exchange for labour, but with 'direct support' for those that were unable to work. In line with strategies of coercive distribution, there were reports of local officials using the threat of withholding resources under PSNP and other emergency support to promote regime dominance. For example, Lavers finds that in Tigray, 'attendance at development team and 1-to-5 meetings was mandatory and… repeated failure to attend would result in deductions being made from the PSNP and emergency assistance' (Lavers, 2024: 241). Lefort meanwhile repeats a claim from his informants that 2,000 people whose homes and farms were destroyed by a natural catastrophe had not received any assistance five months later, and that these people believed this was because they had voted for the opposition during the 2005 elections (Lefort, 2007: 270).

Whilst agricultural inputs and emergency relief were some of the most prominent resources which officials could use to promote acquiescence and compliance on the part of rural citizens, in principle almost any resource or government service could be used in this way. The distribution of land continued to be controlled by the regime, including through the Amhara land reform in 1997, and to a lesser extent, national land titling

programmes (Chinigò, 2022: 71-114; 2015). Vaughan and Tronvoll note the range of services which local people are dependent on the *kebele* for: officials could determine who receives services such as health, water or electricity, and had to give a letter of approval to anyone applying for a job in the public sector. The *kebele* also owned houses and could allocate these as they chose; any repairs to the house would also require permission from the *kebele* (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003: 42-3). Jablonski quotes an opposition party candidate as saying 'People are told if they don't vote EPRDF, then no fertilizers, [and] clinics. If you get sick, they don't get a referral note from the kebele official for hospital in Addis Ababa' (Jablonski, 2014: 293).

A final resource which should be mentioned as part of strategies to use resources to achieve political dominance was employment with the state. As the regime moved to increase significantly the number of paid employees in its ranks, as detailed in the previous sub-section, this could also become a means of securing loyalty. While the proportion of the local population employed by the government was small, it was a significant employer for those with higher levels of education. Indeed in many parts of the country, those with university or diploma education had few options other than working for the government or moving to urban areas. Conversely, the regime retained the ability to fire those officials who were out of favour with the regime – most notably the former Derg cadres referred to as the *birokrasi*.

Developmentalism as a legitimating narrative

The regime's third strategy for political dominance involved deploying developmentalism as a legitimating narrative. This was used by EPRDF from the early years of its rule, but

over time it moved from being one of the regime's core claims to legitimacy to being arguably the primary one. Hagmann and Abbink suggest that shortly after taking power, the EPRDF staked its legitimacy on confronting three policy challenges: '"democratizing" the country, resolving the "national" question, and alleviating poverty and underdevelopment' (Hagmann and Abbink, 2011: 585). The 'national question' refers to the need to give more autonomy to Ethiopia's various ethnic groups. This was a significant focus in the 1990s as the regime moved to create a new ethnic federal structure, with regional boundaries drawn based on ethnic and linguistic criteria. Regarding democratization, in a change from the Derg era, elections were held at regular intervals beginning in 1995. However, the controversy around the 2005 elections, where the regime faced possible election loss and as a result was forced to manipulate results and repress opposition, largely discredited its claim to be bringing democracy.

This led the regime to place a much greater emphasis after 2005 on development. From 2005 on, regime figures increasingly referred to development and 'double digit economic growth' as some of their main achievements. Development had become 'the main *raison d'être* of the state' (Mulugeta, 2020: 2). The wholesale embrace of development, and the idea of a 'developmental state' which increasingly featured in the regime's rhetoric from this point on, was linked closely to the person of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. He developed his own theory of what a developmental state in Africa should look like, grounded in various examples from East Asia, especially Taiwan and South Korea.[16] After 2005, Meles became convinced that ideas of developmentalism and

[16] Meles studied – whilst in office – for a Masters in Economics at Erasmus University, Rotterdam. His unfinished dissertation on the developmental state in Africa sets out much of his thinking and is available online - Zenawi (2006).

the developmental state needed to become a 'hegemonic' discourse within the party, state and wider society (Zenawi, 2012: 167). In this regard, he had various pamphlets produced and circulated which set out his thinking on development. Elsje Fourie recounts how one senior parliamentarian commented on one of these documents: '"We believe in this, as Christians believe in the Bible'" (Fourie, 2012: 139).

The reference to Christians and the Bible is apt here, as ideas of the nature and function of *mengist* (government or state) in Ethiopia are often linked to religious concepts. It is worth exploring these in more detail to reach a deeper understanding of how the narrative of developmentalism was received and understood in rural areas of Amhara region during the period of EPDRF rule.

For many Ethiopians, especially in Amhara, *mengist* is seen as part of a continuum between the people and God. Teferi Abate, for example, notes that 'rural people in highland Ethiopia … recognise the legitimacy of local officials who bridge the gap between state and people, albeit in the way they also recognise the roles of a hierarchy of supernatural beings in mediating relations with God' (Abate, 2004: 626-7). Many authors have taken this observation as suggesting that Ethiopian political culture is especially hierarchical. In a classic anthropological study dating back to the Imperial period, Donald Levine argued that in Amhara 'authority as such is good: indispensable for the well-being of society and worthy of unremitting deference, obeisance, and praise' (Levine, 1965a: 250). Levine argued that there was 'a sort of magical function connected with the higher political authorities' such as the nobility, whose 'presence is regarded as a source of well-being in the country' while the highest authority figure of all was the emperor, 'elect of God', who was 'the recipient of the most extreme forms of obeisance' and whose physical

presence in any part of the country was ‘a transcendent source of social euphoria’ (253-4). Levine’s arguments have been echoed in much scholarship since (see Lefort, 2007; Rahmato, 2009; Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003).

In work which builds on but also revises some of the assumptions of literature on political culture, Daniel Mulugeta’s more recent work on the ethnography of the Ethiopian state (Mulugeta, 2019a, 2019b, 2020) demonstrates both the limits to the authority of *mengist*, and the way the concept has become entwined with developmentalist legitimating narratives. Firstly, Mulugeta notes how deference to authority in Amhara does not suggest that the authority of *mengist* is unquestionable. The patrimonial understanding of *mengist* also imposes strong obligations of paternal care, and if these obligations are not fulfilled, the legitimacy of *mengist* can be threatened. He details how his informants expressed an understanding that the state, like God, is expected to show benevolence and providence towards the people. A good *mengist* would ‘like God… look after the well-being of the poor’. (Mulugeta, 2019b: 295-6). However, if a *mengist* did not demonstrate concern for the people, it could be seen as a bad *mengist*. The Derg was seen in this light; one of Mulugeta’s informants argued that it ‘had no helping nature… [it] acted like a father who doesn’t look after his children but punishes them’ (2019b: 296). This is an important point to make because it emphasises that even in a culture where authority is seen as a good in itself, a government can be evaluated as failing its responsibilities – failing to live up to expectations about how a good *mengist* should behave.

The second observation that Mulugeta makes is that in recent years, understandings of the role of *mengist* have become fundamentally entwined with the language of

delivering development. The very strong emphasis on development made by state and party from 2005 onwards, layered on top of previous governments' development rhetoric, appears to have been reflected in evolving popular understandings of what *mengist* should be and do. Mulugeta finds that the logic of paternal care put forward by respondents also encompassed expectations that *mengist* would deliver developmental improvements. For example, one of his informants said 'the old *mengist* was not the people's *mengist*…the present *mengist* is a good *mengist*. It sends us development. We have the chance to send our children to school. We have a health post on our doorstep.' (Mulugeta, 2019b: 296). It is notable how the rhetoric of development – including particularly construction of infrastructure such as schools, clinics and hospitals – is integrated into the concept of *mengist* alongside the traditional religious understanding of it. In this sense, the EPRDF had been successful in moulding people's understanding of how the regime's legitimacy should be evaluated. People had taken on and internalised the regime's message that a good *mengist* 'sends development'.

The preceding analysis has set out three strategies used by the EPRDF regime to maintain its dominance. Whilst these have been presented separately for the purposes of clarity, they clearly intersected in multiple ways. For example, construction of infrastructure across the country was vital for the regime to implement its mass distribution schemes. Additionally, built structures such as school and clinics, and also dams, roads and railways, were linked to developmentalist legitimating narratives, as they were cited as evidence that the regime was sending development (Verhoeven, 2021;

Mains, 2019; Terrefe, 2022). Mass distribution schemes were also frequently referred to in the regime's developmentalist rhetoric.

What becomes clear through the preceding analysis is how Ethiopia under EPRDF was a context where development projects were particularly likely to strengthen regime political dominance. The EPRDF focus on expanding its territorial reach through bureaucratic and physical infrastructure meant that projects which built schools and clinics, as well as for example local government reform programmes would be likely to contribute directly to regime dominance strategies. Similarly, development projects which distributed agricultural inputs or support to those in need could be enrolled in regime strategies of coercive distribution. Finally, in situating the delivery of development as a primary *raison d'être* of the state, the regime made international development projects particularly liable to being seen as contributing to a broader state-led project. The next section expands on these arguments by reviewing the role of development aid in EPRDF dominance strategies.

Development projects' contribution to EPRDF dominance

Whilst development aid came to be a major contributor to regime political dominance, this did not follow immediately after the EPRDF came to power. Following the fall of the Derg, Western donors did not increase aid levels quickly. Although many were pleased to see the end of the socialist regime, they were also cautious about the EPRDF's Marxist-Leninist ideology. Overall aid levels to Ethiopia actually declined significantly in the 1990s,

from US $1.16 billion in 1992 to $580 million by 1997[17] – perhaps reflecting the high levels of humanitarian aid that had been provided to Ethiopia following the highly publicised famines of the 1980s as well as overall global aid declines in this period.

Despite this uneasy start, in the new century aid volumes started to increase dramatically. The changes in EPRDF orientation and rhetoric from 2001 onwards likely played a significant role in this. Following Meles' victory in the internal TPLF conflict in that year, the increased emphasis on developing capitalism, some short-lived initiatives towards separating party and state and the strong focus on 'capacity building' were recorded by Vaughan and Tronvoll in 2003 as being 'welcome to the liberal democratic ears of the donor community' (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003: 149).

The 2005 elections for a time threatened to derail this newfound partnership between EPRDF and donors, with a number of Western donors diverting aid following the post-election crackdown on opposition and protesters. However, in the months and years afterwards, aid was quickly restored and even increased rapidly. Whilst foreign policy considerations may have played a role here, such as Ethiopia's increasing role in Somalia, donors were likely also swayed by what they saw as the regime's credibility and track record in delivering development results such as economic growth, literacy rates and mortality declines. This was a period where the Millennium Development Goals had recently been agreed; Ethiopia was seen as a country which was both poor and which appeared to be achieving economic growth, reducing poverty and improving performance on other indicators. Meles Zenawi's international reputation had been burnished by his

[17] Data retrieved by the author from OECD data explorer, Dataset DAC2A: Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions (available from https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/official-development-assistance-oda.html, accessed 15 August 2025).

role on Tony Blair's Africa Commission. This made the country a promising candidate for support: donors appeared to believe the trade-off involved in buying into development results and accepting the downside of authoritarian practices was a tolerable one. Aid volumes to the country increased exponentially, from US $986 million in 1999 to $4.33 billion in 2009. By the time of the 2010 elections, much less free than those of 2005, the BBC could refer to Ethiopia as a 'donor darling' (Ross, 2010).

In contrast to many regimes in Africa, the EPRDF maintained strong oversight and control of development aid flows into the country. The EPRDF regime was characterised by international observers as exerting strong centralised control of 'rents' including development aid. The idea was that the state should control rents and allocate them to create value in the economy, preventing them from being captured by private individuals (de Waal, 2015: 164; Clapham, 2018; Kelsall, 2013; Vaughan and Gebremichael, 2011). Hagmann and Abbink provide a less sympathetic summary of this doctrine: 'International aid resources and domestic revenue must primarily accrue to state institutions that plan and implement ''development'' on behalf of the citizenry' (2011: 584). Whether scholars viewed the situation favourably or unfavourably, few disagreed that the EPRDF regime maintained strong control of development assistance.

Perhaps the best example of this was the creation of the Protecting Basic Services (PBS) programme in 2006. This was brought about by donors' decision to stop providing Direct Budget Support following post-election violence in 2005, but has been seen as resumption of budget support by another name. The programme claimed to avoid supporting the regime's questionable human rights practices by bypassing the central government and directly funding regions and districts across Ethiopia using an annual

block grant. However, this depended on a questionable interpretation that local government was only concerned with delivering development and not with repression or restriction of human rights. By 2010, the programme was transferring about US$ 1 billion per year to the federal government, providing 36% of the budget of every *wereda* in Ethiopia in the area of education, health, water, agricultural extension and roads. Given the discussion in the previous section, it should be clear that this was far from a politically neutral function. The regime had found a way of convincing donors they were avoiding supporting authoritarianism whilst acquiring a major injection of funds into its efforts to increase its reach across the country.

NGO projects in Ethiopia were, if anything, even more closely monitored by the regime than donor aid (perhaps because much of the latter was provided directly to government at the time). The regime was sceptical of NGOs even in the 1990s and early 2000s, seeing them as driving 'rent-seeking' and a 'pluralism of patronage' (Zenawi, 2006: 36). Meles and senior regime figures saw NGOs as a threat insofar as they offered 'an alternative mechanism for socio-economic improvement drawing on a vision, methodology, and potential for patronage separate from those of the state' (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003: 64). In 2003, Vaughan and Tronvoll reported that the regime imposed strict regulation and monitoring on NGOs, including a requirement that they 'design and implement their programmes in collaboration with (if not through) local bodies – usually local government structures' (ibid., 63). However, they also noted that the government had recently developed slightly more tolerance for independent NGO-run projects, and also mentioned the recent emergence of a small number of organisations active in the areas of advocacy, lobbying, civic and other education and training.

In retrospect, this was a brief window of tolerance of NGO activity on behalf of the regime. Following the 2005 election debacle, the regime accused NGOs of having supported and funded critics and opposition parties (Hagmann and Abbink, 2011: 584). It subsequently imposed much tighter restrictions on their activities, culminating in the Charities and Societies Proclamation of 2009, which forbade NGOs from working on issues of human rights, governance and conflict resolution if they received more than 10% of their funding from foreign sources (Birru and Wolff, 2019). Feyissa argued in 2011 that EPRDF viewed NGOs as 'subversives rather than allies in the struggle to improve the lives of all Ethiopians' (2011: 805).

The above all demonstrates that the EPRDF benefited from large scale aid flows, and exerted especially strong control over these flows by ensuring they were supporting state-run programmes and other regime priorities. It is therefore not surprising that, to the extent that literature exists on this topic, it finds that development projects acted to strengthen the EPRDF's political dominance. In the rest of this section, I review briefly how development projects are understood to have supported each of the three dominance strategies reviewed above.

Firstly, regarding regime reach, donors provided large-scale support for the regime's expansion of both its bureaucratic and physical infrastructures. Bureaucratic infrastructure was supported through the Public Sector Capacity Building Programme (PSCAP) from 2004. This was an amalgam of various sub-programmes on issues such as civil service reform, urban management, decentralization, the judicial sector and tax system, and upgrading information technology across government. Donor support for decentralisation programmes in particular have been identified as having entrenched

central control of local government rather than leading to the stated goal of increasing local autonomy (Chinigò, 2014; Emmenegger et al., 2011; Chanie, 2007). Donors' massive support for the Protecting Basic Services programme, as reviewed above, funded a full third of local government operations in health, education, water, agriculture and roads, providing multiple opportunities for the regime to develop both physical and bureaucratic infrastructure. Finally, direct construction of physical infrastructure was also a major focus of donor support. Between 2002 and 2009, Ethiopia received an average of $382 million per year in Official Development Assistance disbursements for infrastructure – significantly more than any other African country (NEPAD-OECD, 2011: 12). Notably, this does not include infrastructure projects funded by non-OECD donors such as China, indicating that the total figure was likely considerably higher.

Regarding the use of mass resource distribution to achieve political dominance, again donors were deeply involved in funding various distribution schemes which the regime was able to incorporate into strategies of coercive distribution. Perhaps most notable among these schemes was PSNP, but donors and NGOs provided a wide range of other resource flows which officials (often party members at local level) were able to influence or control. For example, Lavers investigates how distribution practices operated in Tigray, finding that:

> The vast majority of the resources provided by the party-state, affiliated organisations and independent organisations was mediated by the development teams [*limat budin*] and other party-state structures. Development teams played a direct role in distributing the PSNP, emergency

> relief, exemptions from health insurance contributions and even NGO support, which went exclusively to those on local government lists. (2024: 244)

This is notable as it suggests that sub-*kebele* structures such as development teams (heavily influenced by the party) not only manage distribution of the main donor-funded, state-managed programmes such as PSNP, but also support via NGO development projects.

Finally, regarding donor support for the legitimating narrative of developmentalism, donors and NGOs both use developmentalist narratives and in many cases their language echoes that of the regime. There has been little literature specifically on this question based in Ethiopia, but one notable exception is in Daniel Mulugeta's work. Mulugeta looks at the role played by NGOs in constructing the state in Borena Zone, Oromia. He argues strongly that NGOs are fully implicated, through development discourse and practice, in the work of establishing 'the coherence of state power and the idea of the state as a superior and transcendental entity' (2020: 168). For Mulugeta, the fact that NGOs are involved in state development programmes and repeat state development language means they 'function within an authoritarian political hegemony of the state' (2020: 159).

To summarise this section, EPRDF achieved significant control over donor and NGO funding in Ethiopia. Existing literature finds that externally-funded development projects were managed in a such a way that they aligned with and supported existing regime programmes and priorities. Many projects contributed to the expansion of the

bureaucratic and physical infrastructure of the regime at local level. Also at this level, the existence of the wide range of new officials, organised through *kebele* and sub-*kebele* structures, exerted strong influence over distribution not only of donor-funded, state-run schemes such as PBS and PSNP, but also NGO support. As far as can be gathered from existing literature, donor and NGO use of the language of development also reinforced regime legitimating narratives. Overall, this suggests that Ethiopia under EPRDF was a context where most development projects would be expected to strengthen regime political dominance. In the next section, I introduce Menschen für Menschen and the Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project. I will suggest that even among projects in Ethiopia, this project was especially likely to reinforce the dominance of the EPRDF regime. However, the section begins with a general introduction to the origins of MfM and its operations in Ethiopia.

MfM and the MIRDP as a most likely case for strengthening regime dominance

The NGO Menschen für Menschen was the creation of one man: Karlheinz Böhm. Born in 1928, the son of a famous classical conductor, Böhm became famous in his own right in the 1950s when he starred in the *Sissi* trilogy of films alongside Romy Schneider. The role made Böhm a household name for many in German-speaking countries; these films are still shown on television channels to this day, often around Christmas time. After *Sissi*, Böhm's acting career was not straightforward. He starred in Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), which was vilified by the press on its release for its 'perverted' sexual violence and his career took a downward turn. In the 1970s, he worked on four films with Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who he later credited for 'politicising' his thinking and interesting him

in global problems. In the late 1970s he was moved by a documentary on the drought in the Sahel, and made a first private visit to Kenya. Then in May 1981, he was invited onto a German television show, 'Wetten, dass..?' (similar to the British 'You Bet!'). Without any previous background in charitable work, Böhm called on the viewers of the show to donate to needy children in the Sahel, and bet that every third viewer would *not* donate one Mark, one Swiss Franc or seven Austrian Schillings for this cause. He won the bet, in that 'only' 1.6 million Deutschmarks (or equivalent) were announced to have been raised. He subsequently established a foundation to manage these funds: Menschen für Menschen.

Following his appearance on 'Wetten, dass..?', Böhm was introduced to the ambassadors of three countries in the Sahel: Sudan, Chad and Ethiopia. According to Böhm, the ambassadors of Sudan and Chad were not interested in his offer of aid, but the Ethiopian ambassador encouraged him and invited him to visit the country, which he did later in 1981.[18] From this point onwards, Menschen für Menschen operated only in Ethiopia. For three decades, until shortly before his death in 2014, the organisation continued to be closely overseen by Böhm personally. He spent a lot of time in Ethiopia monitoring MfM's work, and even lived for certain periods on one of the NGO's project sites. He also remained the public face of the organisation in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, raising funds through fundraising campaigns, televised appearances, and charity events such as auctions and concerts. Böhm's role as the face of appeals for aid to starving Ethiopians led him to be called the 'German Bob Geldof of development aid' by one commentator at the time of his death (Blaser, 2014).

[18] Television interview of Karlheinz Böhm on 'Alpha Forum', Bayerischen Rundfunk, 16 December 2005, available online at https://www.br.de/fernsehen/ard-alpha/sendungen/alpha-forum/karlheinz-boehm-gespraech100.html (accessed 21 August 2025).

In the 1980s, Böhm established cordial relations with the Derg regime, and set up projects in two areas of the country, Babile and Ilubabor, which were both linked to regime-sponsored resettlement schemes. It was a sign of Böhm and MfM's willingness to support incumbent governments that they chose to support these projects, while many other NGOs avoided doing so in order not to be seen as supporting authoritarian practices.

After the change of regime in 1991, Böhm faced some initial difficulty in building relations with EPRDF, as he had been seen as close to the Derg.[19] With time, however, he developed good relations with Meles and the new government. The change in regime was reflected in changes to the content of MfM projects. After 1991, MfM shifted its support from resettlement schemes to integrated rural development projects, based in a single *wereda*, of which Merhabete was the first example. MfM projects increasingly involved construction of schools, clinics, roads, and other infrastructure such as bridges, which aligned well to EPRDF priorities as it sought to build a developmental state. MfM did not just rebuild its relations with EPRDF, but came to be more closely aligned to the regime than any other NGO. Böhm was awarded honorary Ethiopian citizenship in 2003, a statue of him was erected in a prominent location in Addis Ababa in 2011, and multiple documentaries on his life and work were shown on national television. These accolades were unprecedented for a regime that was, in general, highly sceptical about the role of NGOs.

Both in the Derg and the EPRDF eras, MfM adopted a very close strategic alignment to the regime. Böhm was sometimes challenged for this and justified his decisions in

[19] Interview, MfM member of staff, 15 May 2018.

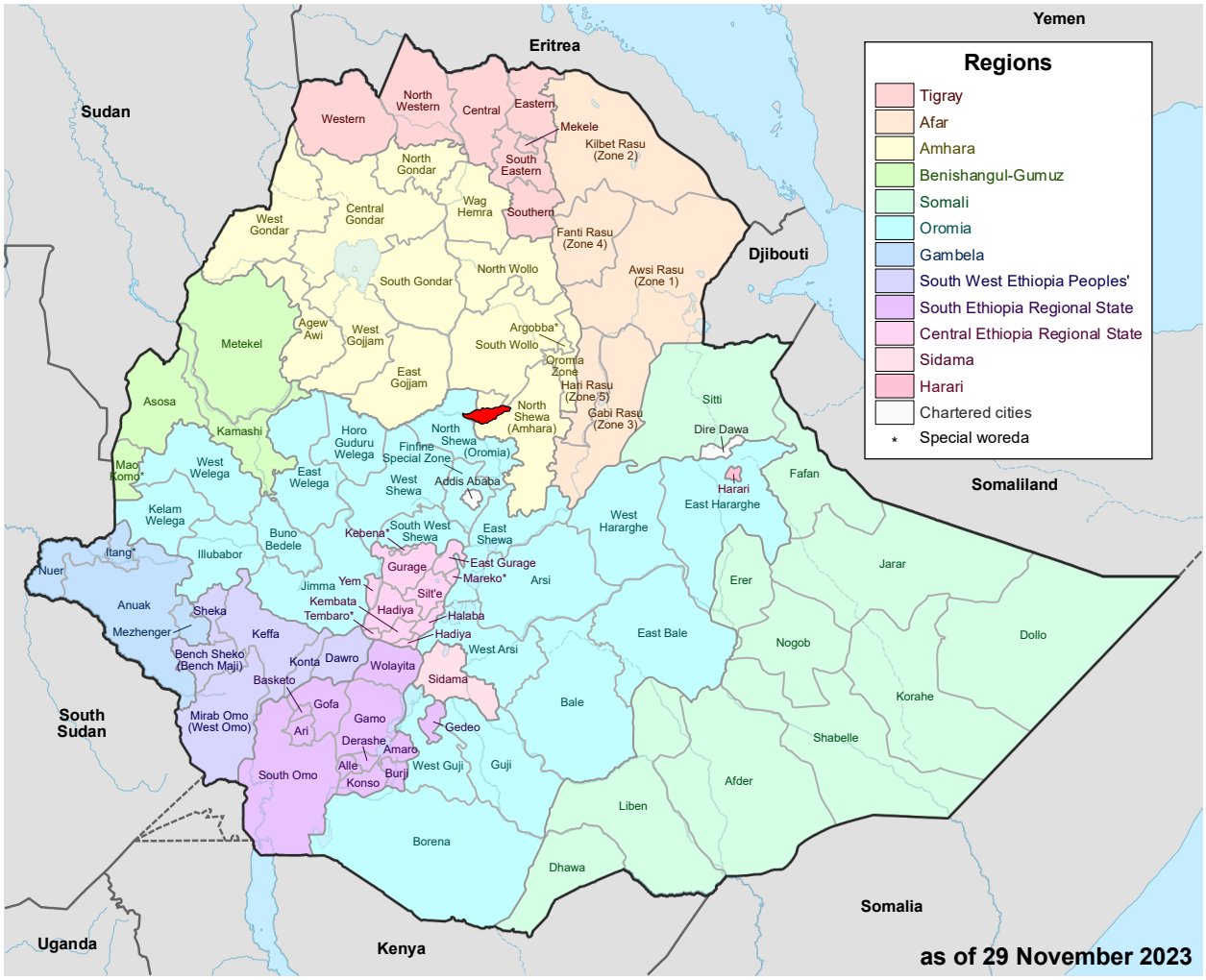
interviews intended for publication or broadcast in Europe. At times he suggested that working closely with an incumbent regime was simply inevitable. When confronted with criticism for supporting the 'dictator' Mengistu Hailemariam, the head of the Derg regime, he said 'I would cooperate with any regime, no matter how criminal or non-criminal the rulers are, if I knew that I could help people by doing so' (Blum and Strieder, 1993: 19, author's translation).

At other times, his decision to align with successive Ethiopian regimes seems to have been a kind of anti-colonial commitment. He was often highly critical of Western powers, for example criticising their weapons sales. He was also sceptical about the intentions and effects of state-to-state aid, which is one reason for the name *Menschen für Menschen*: people for people. In another interview he talked about the risk of NGOs collaborating with one another in Ethiopia as they might form 'a neo-colonialist bloc'. MfM, he said, should rather 'orientate [itself] to the needs and possibilities of the government planning authorities.[20] Böhm's viewpoint here seemed to be that the regime was more likely to know what was 'good for the people' than MfM, or other Western organisations. This made MfM quite unusual amongst international NGOs in Ethiopia.

The sense of MfM as distinct from other NGOs and closely aligned to the regime also came out in interviews I held with other NGO staff: for example, an experienced consultant who had worked in several international NGOs told me that the government loves MfM, but he did not consider it professional from a developmental perspective. It operated through personal contacts of Böhm. It was there to develop infrastructure, he said; it

[20] Interview of Karlheinz Böhm in *Blickpunkt Zukunft: Zeitschrift mit Beiträgen und Zeitdokumenten zur Zukunfts- und Friedensdiskussion* [Viewpoint Future: Magazine with articles and contemporary documents on the Future and Peace Discussion], 30th edition, November 1996. Author's translation.

helped provide services without making the government accountable.[21] Given MfM's particularly close alignment with the regime, it would appear to be more likely to bolster regime dominance than other development agencies in the country. The Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project appeared especially likely to do so, as will be seen in the next section.



Map 1: Map of Ethiopia showing all regions and zones. Merhabete wereda (in red) added by author. Source: User:SUM1 / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-4.0.

[21] Interview, consultant and former NGO member of staff, 22 June 2018.

The Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP)

The MIRDP was based in the *wereda* of Merhabete, which is situated in North Shewa Zone of Amhara region (see map). The project had its origins late in the Derg period, with the first small scale activities starting in 1988-9. In its original plans and activities it focused especially on soil and water conservation, which had been a major priority for the Derg.[22] After the change of government, whilst the project continued to work on soil and water conservation, this gradually shifted from being the core of the project towards being one among many priorities. The MIRDP provided agricultural extension services in line with the new regime's doctrine of agricultural development-led industrialization. It also supported a government health scheme, the Expanded Programme of Immunisation, which involved providing transport and expenses for government officers providing immunisation services across the *wereda*.

The MIRDP was engaged in a wide range of different activities, from various kinds of training, health services, veterinary services, campaigns against 'harmful traditional practices' such as female genital mutilation and early marriage, and a savings and credit scheme for women. However, with time, its dominant activity became construction. Whilst this had always featured as part of the project, from the 2000s onwards it rose in prominence and after 2005 it was – at least in budgetary terms – the project's main focus. Drawing on the 'Terminal Report' from the project's 2003-04 phase, 47% of the total budget was spent on construction, while in the equivalent report for the 2005-07 phase,

[22] Menschen für Menschen (MfM), 'Programme Document: Merhabete Integrated Conservation and Development Programme – First 5-Year Phase, December 1987'. Available online at https://boris-portal.unibe.ch/entities/publication/ce3ffb08-6931-456d-82fd-3e8b9a7d8601/full Accessed 14 November 2025. See also Hoben (1995); Rahmato (2001); Admassie (2009).

this rose to 67%. This also coincided with a massive expansion in the budget of the MIRDP in the last years before it closed; whereas in 2003-04 the project was spending on average around 14 million Ethiopian Birr per year (approximately 1.4m Euro), by 2005-07 this had doubled to 30 million per year (approximately 3 million Euro).[23] In the 1990s, construction efforts had focused on water points, along with some health stations and a kindergarten. In the 2000s – in addition to the major construction projects of Alem Ketema Enat Hospital (completed 2003) and the Almaz Böhm Technical and Vocational Education and Training College (completed 2007) – school blocks were added to the project's construction efforts and these were a major focus of the final years of the project.

By 2009, the project had constructed 819km of rural access roads and two all-weather roads of 12 km each. It had built or renovated 28 schools and 23 teachers' residences, as well as two kindergartens. Only 9 of a total of 37 schools in the *wereda* were not either built or renovated by MfM. Along with the hospital, 18 health posts, three new clinics and two health centres had been built; at the start of implementation in 1992 there had only been one health centre and one health station.[24] At just the time that the EPRDF was attempting to build a developmental state, the MIRDP shifted its focus towards construction, and played a major part in expanding state infrastructure in the *wereda*.

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[23] All budgetary figures in this paragraph are the author's own calculations based on tables in 'Menschen für Menschen, Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project, Terminal Report for the Year 2003-04, November 2004' and 'Menschen für Menschen, Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project, Terminal Report for the Project Period 2005-2007, March 2008'. An approximate historical exchange rate of 10 ETB per Euro is drawn from searches on xe.com.

[24] All figures taken from KDA Management Consultancy, 'Menschen Fuer Menschen Foundation (MFMF): Impact Assessment of Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP)' October 2009 (MfM Addis Ababa Archives).

The main phase of the Merhabete project closed in 2007, but for a further two years activities continued on a lower scale, mainly an anti-HIV and AIDS project, as well as some efforts to ensure that the project's investments were sustained. An evaluation was carried out in 2009. At the same time, the project was being replicated in other areas of Ethiopia. The Merhabete project became something of a flagship for MfM in the EPRDF era. It was in Merhabete that Böhm had been awarded Ethiopian citizenship in 2003, on the occasion of the opening of Alem Ketema Enat Hospital. Similar rural development projects were started in neighbouring *weredas* of Derra in 1997, Midda in 2000 and Jamma in 2005.[25] By 2007, MfM was running ten integrated rural development projects in Ethiopia, with a total annual spend of 21.8 million Euro. At this time the organisation had 776 staff in Ethiopia, of which four were Europeans and the rest Ethiopians.[26]

The MIRDP appeared to be the kind of development project which would be especially likely to strengthen regime dominance. Firstly, it built a large number of structures which likely helped to deepen state and regime reach across the district. As the regime was developing bureaucratic and physical infrastructure across large swathes of the country, establishing development teams and one-to-five networks, and building schools, clinics and roads, MfM was building these structures in Merhabete (and other *weredas*). This would be expected to deepen regime reach in Merhabete while freeing up state resources which might otherwise have been required to build some of these structures in the district. It seemed likely also that MfM structures would bolster the regime's image in Merhabete, as old buildings and tracks were replaced by more modern structures and all-weather

[25] Menschen für Menschen Austria, Jahresbericht [Annual Report] 2006.

[26] Menschen für Menschen Austria, Jahresbericht [Annual Report] 2007.

roads, which would convey an image of modernity and progress, which the regime could claim to be bringing to the people.

Secondly, the project had many resource streams which in principle would seem likely to have been captured by officials. These included agricultural inputs (a major plank of the regime's own mass distribution strategies), training programmes, furniture and equipment for schools, clinics and other facilities, and 'social support' for particularly needy individuals or those affected by emergencies. Given the experience of other donor programmes – for example as documented by Lavers (2024: 244), who suggested that NGO support 'went exclusively to those on local government lists' – it seemed likely that MIRDP resource streams would have been captured in a similar way.

To provide some nuance to this, it is worth noting that the MIRDP passed few resources through state systems, unlike say donor support to the PSNP or PBS programmes. It also carried out a small amount of service delivery of its own, for example operating a livestock centre and veterinary clinics, and organising volunteer doctors from Addis Ababa to provide eye operations to relieve trachoma, trichiasis and other eye conditions.[27] Nonetheless, compared to many other NGO projects, the MIRDP was not an example of parallel service delivery. The majority of its resources were either invested in built structures which were owned and operated by the state, or in resource streams which would be expected to be subject to regime control such as agricultural inputs and training allowances. These would likely have been used by the regime as part of its strategies of

[27] MfM Addis Ababa archives. KDA Management Consultancy, 'Menschen Fuer Menschen Foundation (MFMF): Impact Assessment of Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP)' October 2009, 86-7.

coercive distribution, given the strong EPRDF emphasis on party control of resource distribution as a core element of its political dominance.

Thirdly, regarding legitimation practices, MIRDP again seemed especially likely to have strengthened EPRDF dominance, both through strategic alignment and use of developmentalist narratives. Regarding strategic alignment, MfM positioned itself very close to the regime on the national stage, and there are well-known examples (such as the opening of the hospital) when Karlheinz Böhm appeared in public in a position of partnership with senior regime figures including Meles Zenawi. As seen above, Böhm was also public about the need for MfM to orient itself to the needs and priorities of Ethiopian ministries. One would expect these top-level signals of alignment to filter down into the day-to-day interactions between MfM and officials. Interactions between MfM staff and officials would likely have conveyed the impression of MfM as a partner with the regime in the joint struggle to reduce poverty and achieve development.

Regarding developmentalist narratives, again, the desire of Böhm to orient MfM towards the government's development priorities would be likely to lead MfM staff at local levels to repeat government narratives on certain aspects of development. More generally, the NGO appeared clearly to be involved in the business of 'taking state-led development to the people' rather than 'taking people-led development to the state' (Dodworth, 2022: 93). In building infrastructure and seeking to improve state-led service delivery, rather than seeking to advocate change or influence state policy, it appeared to be propagating a vision of the process of development which was state-led. In Daniel Mulugeta's terms, the MIRDP appeared to be reinforcing the idea that *mengist* sends

development, and thus functioned ‘within an authoritarian political hegemony of the state’ (2020: 159).

Conclusion

This chapter has set out how the EPRDF sought to achieve political dominance in rural areas of Ethiopia, has considered the role of development projects in these strategies, and has introduced the Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project, run by Menschen für Menschen, as an example of a project which was especially likely to strengthen regime dominance. I have emphasised three key strategies that the EPRDF sought to use to achieve dominance in rural areas. Firstly, it increased regime reach deep into the Ethiopian countryside. It did this by developing bureaucratic infrastructures of state and party that reached down to household level, and by dramatically improving physical infrastructure such as roads, schools and health clinics. Secondly, the regime used mass distribution as a strategy to maintain or increase its political dominance, by making rural people dependent on the state and by using the threat of withdrawal of resources to ensure compliance and acquiescence. Thirdly, the EPRDF staked its legitimacy on delivering development, especially after 2005 when its previous claims to be democratizing the country became much less credible. It was suggested that EPRDF’s dominance strategies were especially likely to be strengthened by development initiatives.

The chapter then moved on to argue that development aid in Ethiopia has indeed been fundamentally entwined in these regime dominance strategies. Through programmes such as the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) and the Protecting Basic Services

programme (PBS), donors have provided huge volumes of aid which have played a very large part in the expansion of regime reach, and have also massively increased the volume of resources available for the regime to use as part of strategies of coercive distribution. Through strategic alignment and through repeating developmentalist narratives, development agencies have also bolstered understandings of the regime as the natural source and bringer of development.

Finally, the chapter introduced Menschen für Menschen and the Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project, which I have argued should be considered a most likely case for a project which strengthened regime political dominance. I argued that the MIRDP is likely to have strengthened EPRDF dominance because it built a large amount of infrastructure, which aligned well with regime strategies of increasing its reach across the country. It also had a number of resource streams, such as training programmes and distribution of agricultural inputs, which one would expect to have been captured by officials at local level. Finally, the project is likely to have strengthened regime dominance through its legitimating practices. Böhm aligned MfM very closely with the regime including through multiple public appearances, while the NGO's approach of constructing infrastructure appeared to be reinforcing ideas of bringing state-led development to the people.

This chapter has made the case that, on the basis of publicly available information on the MIRDP and existing literature, one would expect the MIRDP to strengthen regime dominance. The following three chapters review if this was in fact the case. In these three chapters I reveal my findings about the extent to which the MIRDP in practice – and over the long term – strengthened or undermined regime political dominance, according to the

three mechanisms reviewed in the previous chapter: building structures, distributing resources, and legitimation practices. I begin with the mechanism on building structures.

Chapter 5: MIRDP's built structures and their political legacy

To anyone visiting Merhabete a decade after the MIRDP closed, evidence of the NGO's former presence in the district was striking. MfM-built infrastructure was everywhere – from the large hospital and vocational training centre in Alem Ketema, the *wereda* capital, to school blocks, clinics and water points in rural *kebeles*. In addition to these structures, various billboards and signs with MfM's logo were scattered across the landscape; the material legacy of the project was visible in almost every village. This chapter explores the political implications of that material legacy. It asks whether these built structures were acting to strengthen the EPRDF's political dominance ten years after project closure.

Drawing on the mechanism set out in chapter 3, the chapter explores two processes by which project-built structures may have contributed to regime political dominance: through expanding regime reach and enhancing regime image. In the first half of the chapter, I review the function of built structures in expanding regime reach – the presence and visibility of the regime across the territory. This is done in two sections. The first provides an analysis of the function and condition of the various buildings constructed by MfM in the district. I find that most of the structures built by MfM were still very much in use by officials and were integrated into bureaucratic networks. Particularly notable were former MfM field offices in rural *kebeles,* which had been converted into offices of the *kebele* administration. In the second section, drawing on interviews and archival materials, I illustrate how this came about: how officials oversaw and monitored the MIRDP to ensure that structures were built in ways that fulfilled regime needs.

The second half of the chapter reviews how project-built structures impacted on regime image. I show that, against expectations, the structures built by the MIRDP did not reinforce regime legitimating narratives by modernising the image of the state in the eyes of citizens. Officials attempted to present MfM as part of a broader, state-led, project of bringing modernity and development to the people, but according to my interlocutors this was not successful. Most people did not link MfM-built infrastructure to state-led development; they rather made a contrast between the NGO's generosity and capacity, and a regime which they saw as having neglected the district. MfM structures, I found, served as a reminder of what a good *mengist* (government or state) ought to look like – one which was more caring, more generous and better at delivering development than EPRDF. This undermined the regime's developmentalist legitimating narratives and weakened people's acceptance of regime rule, thus undermining its political dominance in the area.

The chapter thus presents a puzzle which I return to throughout the rest of the thesis: why did a project run by an NGO which was closely aligned to the EPRDF regime, whose staff worked very closely with officials and which built large amounts of infrastructure in line with regime priorities, weaken the EPRDF's political dominance in the local area? Part of the answer is presented in the last section of the chapter. The project's material legacy did not only consist of schools, clinics, roads, and offices, but also an array of billboards and signs bearing MfM's logo, along with two statues of Karlheinz Böhm. These provided a prominent visual reminder of the NGO's former presence in the district a decade after closure. Also, the MfM-built structures which the regime chose not to maintain stand as ruins in the landscape, again reminding passers-by of MfM's previous

work in the area. These go some way to explaining the puzzle, but they do not tell the full story. The other empirical chapters of the thesis provide further material on why the MIRDP undermined regime political dominance.

In summary, the chapter's main finding is that the MIRDP's built structures strengthened regime reach, while undermining regime image. This finding both adds to and challenges much of the current literatures on aid, NGOs and authoritarianism. It adds to that literature by demonstrating that supposedly politically 'neutral' NGO support – which would generally be seen as part of initiatives to improve 'service delivery' – can significantly enhance regimes' political dominance. However, it also challenges these literatures by emphasising how the ideational impacts of built structures can undermine regime legitimating narratives, even though the same structures may enable their reach.

The MIRDP's built structures and their impact on regime reach

The scale of the construction work carried out by MfM has already been alluded to in the previous chapter, but is worth setting out in more detail. According to the final evaluation of the project, by 2009 the project had constructed the following:

- *Roads*. 819km of rural access roads were built, and two all-weather roads of 12 km each, in addition to a 773-step staircase which linked previously isolated communities to Alem Ketema.[28]

[28] MfM Addis Ababa Archives. KDA Management Consultancy, 'Menschen Fuer Menschen Foundation (MFMF): Impact Assessment of Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP)' October 2009, 114-119.

- *Schools*. 28 schools were built or renovated, along with two kindergartens, 23 teachers' residences, and a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) College. According to the final evaluation, there were only 9 schools out of 37 in the *wereda* which had not been built or renovated by MfM.[29]
- *Health facilities*. One hospital (Alem Ketema Enat Hospital), 18 health posts, three new clinics and two health centres were constructed. Staff residences were also built; the number is not stated in the evaluation. According to the final evaluation, there had only been one health centre and one health station in 1992.[30]
- *Water points*. A total of 263 water points were built in 23 *kebeles*, including 176 Hand Dug Wells, 23 Ponds, 64 developed springs, 3 Cisterns for health clinics, and 1 piped water supply for Fetra town.[31]
- *Agricultural structures*. One livestock centre, nine veterinary clinics, and 65 cattle crushes were built, along with five water intake structures on the two rivers of the *wereda*. The evaluation also reports that people built 13,889km of 'physical and biological soil and water conservation works' which included terraces, but also planting of trees and grasses to protect the soil.[32]

Clearly this scale of construction made a major difference to the extent of state infrastructure in Merhabete. The vast majority of both schools and health clinics had been

[29] ibid., 93-100.

[30] ibid., 82-92.

[31] ibid., 73-81.

[32] ibid., 52-72.

constructed or renovated by MfM. At the time of my visits to the district, I found these structures all in use and well-staffed; buildings were generally in good condition. Several schools had blocks that pre-dated MfM's time side-by-side with those built by MfM, allowing a comparison. Image 1 and Image 2 on page 131 show school buildings in Remesht *kebele*. The contrast is significant: 'modern' materials of concrete and glass replace wood and mud walls; straight lines replace rough edges. The new buildings give an impression of solidity and quality. There seems little doubt that these structures extended the regime's reach across Merhabete. At the time I visited, officials were working in, living in, and using MfM-constructed schools, clinics and other buildings. They were generally well maintained and furnished; for example, I heard that new beds had recently been provided to the hospital.[33]

[33] Interview, business owner and former model farmer, 14 November 2019.



Image 1: Non-MfM School building, Remesht kebele. Author's photograph, 13 November 2019.



Image 2: MfM-built school building, Remesht kebele. Author's photograph, 13 November 2019.

While these structures were evidently used as part of regime campaigns to improve school enrolment rates and health statistics, due to the nature of local government practice in rural Amhara, they were also enrolled in regime dominance strategies. Teachers and hospital staff in EPRDF Ethiopia had political obligations as well as 'developmental' ones and the building of schools and clinics across the district had a vital political function. For example, a series of reports in MfM's archives about activities in Alem Ketema hospital around the time of the 2005 election complain of 'political interference' in the hospital's operations by the local *wereda* administration,[34] and the use of an ambulance and a pickup by the *wereda* for 'non-hospital related reasons'[35] – including 'carrying soldiers and par militias [paramilitaries] to frighten the population during election and after election time.'[36] They also provide an account of the 'Evaluation of the Hospital Staff' (presumably *gim gema*), which 'terrorized' staff and led to someone losing their job.[37] This illustrates how ostensibly 'politically neutral' structures intended to improve education and health can play important roles in maintaining regimes' political dominance, including violent coercion and propagation of legitimating narratives.

Project-built roads were also in a good state, for example the road from Alem Ketema to Yessa *kebele*, which had been built by contractors commissioned by MfM and which I walked along several times during my visits. Some interviewees praised this road, saying

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[34] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – Enat Hospital. Protocol: Meeting at PCO in Addis Ababa for discussion of AKH issues, January 2005; Monthly Report to the Medical Director: December 2004.

[35] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – Enat Hospital. Monthly Report to the Medical Director: December 2004.

[36] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – MERH 2005. Memo from Medical Consultant to Karlheinz Böhm, October 2005.

[37] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – Enat Hospital. Letter to MfM head office: January 2005.

it was better than one constructed more recently by a private company. Whilst many interviewees welcomed better roads, for example a shop keeper who said they dramatically improved his business,[38] roads also had a political dimension. Rural access roads built by MfM helped to facilitate easier access to rural *kebeles* by officials working in Alem Ketema. For example, a government official who had formerly worked for the bureau of agriculture in Merhabete commented that he used to visit rural *kebeles* by motorbike, and that MfM-built roads made his journey and his work easier.[39]

The kinds of people who improved their access into rural areas included not only teachers, health workers and local government officials, but also party cadres, tax collectors and militia. A memo from the MIRDP Alem Ketema office to MfM head office in Addis Ababa just before the 2005 elections complained that people had erected road blocks on a rural access road built by MIRDP. The memo ascribed these to 'action against the activities made by the project'.[40] This suggests not everyone welcomed the increased access of the regime into rural areas.

Perhaps the most important way in which the MIRDP enhanced regime reach was a type of construction that was not recorded in official evaluations or statistics. This was the considerable network of buildings built originally by MfM for its own staff to use during implementation, such as project offices, staff residences, a guest house and other structures. I found these had been handed to the regime on project closure. For example, at the time I visited, the former main project office in Alem Ketema was in use as the office

[38] Interview, shop owner, 1 December 2019.

[39] Interview, former *wereda* government official, 5 February 2020.

[40] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file - MERH 2005. Memo from MIRDP to MfM-Addis, 14/3/05.

of the *wereda* agriculture bureau. The former MfM training centre was a *kebele* office for Alem Ketema town. The workshop MfM built for vehicle repairs was operated by the TVET college. Significantly, MfM had also built a network of field offices in the *kebeles*, sometimes including residences for Development Agents. There are no lists of these available in the archives, but those I visited were all in use as offices for *kebele* officials. An example of this is shown in image 3 below: this was part of the MfM field office in Yessa *kebele* during the implementation of the MIRDP, but, as of 2019, was being used by the *kebele* administration.



Image 3: former MfM office building in Yessa kebele, now used by officials. Author's photograph, 30 May 2019.

These structures were, if anything, even more of a boost to regime reach than schools, clinics and roads. They provided *wereda* and *kebele* officials – who in rural Amhara were

often party cadres as well as state employees – with a network of sturdy buildings right across the *wereda* to facilitate their work. Whilst teachers and health workers could be pressurised into carrying out party business alongside their other duties, this kind of work was the bread and butter of *kebele* and sub-*kebele* officials, such as leaders of development teams and one-to-five networks. Having a network of built structures from which to manage their tasks, combined with improved roads, led to a considerable increase in regime reach into previously hard-to-access areas.

Whilst a large number of project-built structures were still being used and maintained by the regime at the time of my visits to Merhabete, not all such structures were in a good state of repair. Water points, in particular, were only partially functional. Some interviewees stressed the high quality of MfM water points; for example, one woman who was a former member of a spinning group said 'We are still thanking them and blessing them for the water. It's fine water now. It was prepared using cement with pipelines. It was finely done. It's a resource you can pass from generation to generation.'[41] However, a former MfM member of staff from the water department told me that more than half of MfM-built water points in the *wereda* were non-functional as of 2019.[42] Already in 2009, the evaluation commissioned by MfM had found that 'During our FGDs and field observation visits, communities bitterly complained about the poor services and lack of technicians to maintain their pumps from the district Water Resource Development

[41] Interview, former member of spinning group, 8 January 2020.

[42] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 April 2019.

Office.'[43] Another set of structures built by MfM that the regime did not maintain was veterinary clinics. Image 4 below shows the one in Remesht *kebele*, which is now an empty shell.



Image 4: Former Veterinary Clinic, Remesht kebele. Author's photograph, 13 November 2019.

Perhaps the most visible structure of this type was the Amden Livestock Centre, a high-profile initiative of the MIRDP. Built just outside of Alem Ketema, the centre originally had a poultry farm, a dairy station, a bull fattening station, a sheep breeding station, and a forage station. In 2004, the centre reported producing 51,391 eggs, 5483 chicks, 12,712

[43] MfM Addis Ababa Archives. KDA Management Consultancy, 'Menschen Fuer Menschen Foundation (MFMF): Impact Assessment of Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP)' October 2009, 77.

litres of milk, and distributed 3610 pullets to farmers.[44] But when I visited it in 2019, it was largely abandoned (see image 5 below); half fallen down buildings were slowly being covered by grass. In one of the buildings a group of young people were looking after chickens, but no one was using any of the MfM specialist equipment.



Image 5: Ruined building, formerly part of Amden Livestock Centre. Author's Photograph, 19 September 2019.

Evidently, these structures were not enhancing regime reach at the time of my visits in 2019-20. In fact, they were potentially worsening the image of the state – a point I will return to later. But first, in order to understand why some of the structures built by MfM were maintained by officials and others left to crumble, the next section draws on

[44] MfM Addis Ababa Archives. Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project: Fourth Quarter and Annual Report for the Fiscal Year 2004, January 2005, 39-40.

interviews and archival materials to explore how the regime sought to use the built structures of the MIRDP to enhance its reach and thus its political dominance.

Regime oversight of MIRDP construction and its impact on reach

In my conversations around the *wereda* and investigations in the archives, it became clear that increased regime reach was not an accidental by-product of the MIRDP but was something officials worked hard to achieve. MfM staff were required to coordinate their actions with officials on a day-to-day basis, and this included decisions about the location and design of MfM-constructed buildings.[45] A former *wereda* official was at pains to stress how officials oversaw all construction and other work by MfM:

> We worked closely together. With all the works they did, it was the government who coordinated things; there wasn't a single thing they did by themselves… For example, all elementary schools and teachers' staff residences were built by Menschen [MfM] in the *wereda* and when they did this, they made contact with the education bureau. Like I told you, when they worked in agriculture, for all the works, they collaborated and signed an agreement on every level with the office.[46]

[45] Interview, MfM member of staff, 3 May 2019.

[46] Interview, former *wereda* government official, 30 November 2019. People in Merhabete often referred to MfM as 'Menschen'.

This account gives a sense of the desire of officials to control and coordinate the actions of MfM through requesting signed agreements. Even if it exaggerates the level of control of officials over the MIRDP's activities, it indicates the aspiration that the regime had to control as much as possible of what the NGO was doing. In another example of how officials sought to assert their authority over the project, I was given an account of a time when Karlheinz Böhm was visiting Merhabete to open a newly-constructed school, but the government refused to attend the inauguration because the school was 'not built as per the standard.'[47] MfM staff were furious at the snub to their chairperson, but for officials, this was a way of demonstrating that the regime was in control of development-related construction in Merhabete.

The regime also established detailed processes for formal monitoring of the MIRDP, as it did for other NGO projects elsewhere in the country. At the end of each two- to three-year 'phase' of the MIRDP it was subject to a formal evaluation by a group of officials including some from the *wereda* and other experts sent from further up the government hierarchy (Debre Berhan, capital of North Shewa Zone or Bahir Dar, capital of Amhara region). They produced a written report and held a meeting to discuss its findings, the minutes of which were available in the archives. One of the major topics picked up by evaluations was the extent of collaboration between MfM and officials. For example, the 2005-07 evaluation praised MfM for collaborating very closely and establishing good

[47] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 17 April 2019.

relations with the *wereda* education office, but criticised the NGO for poor collaboration in the water sector.[48]

Another illustration of the extent of regime monitoring of the MIRDP was the way it handled the project's phase out period in 2009. At this time, MfM transferred a variety of materials to the government, including vehicles, agricultural tools, kitchen materials, and furniture, which is common practice for many NGO and donor projects. Officials worked diligently to ensure that MfM resources were not diverted into private hands. One official who had been closely involved in the handover process described the formation of a handover committee, involving officials from various sectors within which MfM had worked. Each day, the material to be handed over would be recorded on a spreadsheet, including records of items' quality and description. Every evening, the lists would be reviewed in the presence of the *wereda* administrator and department heads.[49]

Despite this general picture of close oversight by the regime over the project's construction activities, I also came across some anecdotes which suggested that this was not constant, but varied over time and across sectors. At times officials appeared to have little control of construction work, particularly in the early years of the project. One elder told me about how he had mobilised people to build a road in one community when officials from the *wereda* came and told that they stop – on the grounds that 'the road has to pass through all *kebeles* not just one'.[50] He proudly related how he continued quietly with preparations for the road including removing fences, in defiance of officials' orders.

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[48] MfM Addis Ababa archives. 'Menschen für Menschen Integrated Rural Development Project, January 2005 – December 2007, Closing Evaluation Report' (in Amharic). Digital copy received from MfM staff.

[49] Interview, former *wereda* government official, 5 February 2020.

[50] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

Another anecdote was from the water sector – which seemed to be subject to less official oversight than education or health. Many water points were constructed using labour mobilised at the local level, without much support or oversight from officials. I was told how in one *kebele*, the chairperson had written a letter explicitly stating that people were not required to work on constructing a well – that they were free to participate or not to participate as they wished.[51] In these examples, construction appears to have been organised between MfM and local community leaders, in the face of opposition or indifference from the regime.

What explains the fact that the regime closely supervised the construction of some structures, such as schools and health clinics, and maintained them well after project closure – whilst other structures such as water points and veterinary clinics were largely unsupervised during construction and allowed to deteriorate afterwards? Whilst it might seem at first that the regime simply lacked capacity to maintain a large volume of infrastructure, on closer inspection there appears to be a logic behind this, likely reflecting a deliberate prioritisation by officials. Firstly, the regime prioritised maintaining facilities which were core elements of its strategies for political dominance. Health clinics and schools could be staffed by state employees, who could be used to propagate regime legitimating narratives and roll out major programmes subject to practices of coercive distribution. Water points such as wells and springs are not staffed and therefore did not present such an opportunity for maintaining regime dominance. Whilst veterinary clinics could in principle be staffed in the same way as health clinics, these were not prioritised

[51] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

as highly as schools or health clinics in the regime's own infrastructure plans. The decision to prioritise infrastructural facilities which were core elements of the regime's own strategies therefore makes sense.

Secondly, there was a distinction in the way the regime handled structures built for MfM to deliver services, versus those built for regime service delivery. As noted in chapter 4, MfM delivered few services itself, with the majority of its work particularly in later years of the project focused on constructing facilities for the government to take on. However, it did provide some services itself, in particular in the area of agriculture. Veterinary clinics and the Amden Livestock Centre were at first operated by MfM staff. It is not surprising, then, that the regime allowed MfM to operate these services in areas which were some way away from the main population centres of the district – in contrast to school blocks and health clinics which were usually located strategically in more densely-populated areas. In locating structures for NGO service delivery in more remote areas, the regime perhaps sought to ensure that regime-operated buildings remained the primary infrastructural network in the district, minimising the risk that NGO structures would become a competing network. After project closure, unsurprisingly, the regime did not attempt to start delivering services from former NGO structures which were located out of the way and where state service delivery had not been previously envisaged.

Thirdly, the regime increased its capacity to monitor and oversee the project's construction work over time. In the early phases of the project, MfM was often left to negotiate directly with communities at *kebele* level, with or without the support of *kebele* officials but usually without much interest from the *wereda*. Buildings were constructed through community labour, with MfM providing raw materials and some individuals with

specialist skills and machinery as required. Later on, as the EPRDF increased the number and capacities of officials throughout the local government structure nationally – facilitated in Merhabete by MIRDP's built structures – it was able to use this to exert more control over MfM construction work. In these later years of the project, MfM spent more of its budget on construction and focused this on structures which were high priorities for the regime, particularly school blocks. These were built through private contractors and the specifications needed to be negotiated and agreed with officials. So regime oversight over project construction activity was enhanced as a result of both increasing regime capacity and increasing MfM willingness to coordinate with the regime.

In summary, drawing the past two sections together, the MIRDP significantly increased regime reach in Merhabete, due in no small measure to efforts by officials. The MIRDP became deeply entwined in the regime project of building physical infrastructure as a means to enhance its reach and thus its political dominance. Broadly speaking, this was what I expected to find, but one element which was not expected was the network of MfM field offices in the district which were later converted into *wereda* and *kebele* administration offices. These provided particularly strong support to the regime's efforts to develop its infrastructural networks in the district. Whilst schools and health clinics were important elements of the regime's strategies to enhance its reach, *wereda* and *kebele* offices were the principal means by which the regime sought to access, monitor and control rural populations; a network of offices for *kebeles* across the district therefore gave regime reach a critical boost.

Reviewing the way officials managed this process, it appears they were strategic in their decisions regarding which structures to maintain and which to allow to deteriorate.

Schools, clinics, the hospital, the TVET college and *kebele* offices were maintained, as they were closely integrated into regime dominance strategies. Veterinary clinics, the Livestock Centre and water points were not, as they were tangential or unconnected to these efforts. However, the consequence of these decisions was the existence of development ruins: buildings abandoned in the landscape which served as a reminder of the former presence of MfM and the MIRDP. The next section turns to how these, as well as the other structures built by MfM, were understood and remembered by residents of Merhabete.

The MIRDP's built structures and their impact on regime image

As set out in chapters 3 and 4, built structures do not only impact on regimes' political dominance through their effects on state reach. They can also reinforce or interact with regimes' legitimating narratives by conveying particular images of the state. Regimes often refer to infrastructural facilities such as roads or railways in their communications with citizens, with the intention of gaining credit for bringing modernity or progress to the people (Terrefe, 2022). In the case of the MIRDP, given that MfM-built facilities were more modern and better-constructed than previous state buildings (see images 1 and 2 above), my expectation was that these would be seen as improving the image of the regime, reinforcing the idea that EPRDF was bringing development.

This was in fact how officials and senior regime leaders attempted to present the work of MfM in the district. Perhaps the best example of this was the inauguration of Alem Ketema Enat Hospital. This was arguably the centrepiece of MfM's work in Merhabete: it is the largest and most impressive facility constructed by the NGO in the district. At the

time of its construction, there were few other hospitals of this size in rural towns such as Alem Ketema; in fact, I was advised that the hospital served not only Merhabete but four surrounding *weredas* as well.

The official opening of the hospital in 2003 was a major public occasion, presided over by PM Meles and Karlheinz Böhm, and broadcast in a special programme on national television. The choreography of this event positioned *mengist* as the senior partner in a joint campaign against poverty. In the television footage, which I reviewed at the EBC video archives in Addis Ababa, Böhm was seen greeting Meles as he arrived by helicopter – situating Meles as the senior partner, the most distinguished guest. Then, in Meles' speech at the opening ceremony, he characterized MfM and Böhm (often referred to colloquially as 'Karl' in Ethiopia) as subsumed within a wider government-led development campaign:

> Karl [Böhm] and his organization deliver aid with great responsibility and thoroughness, with great care that they do not create a sense of dependence in the community… [they are] at the forefront of the government's anti-poverty struggle.[52]

By situating Böhm and MfM 'at the forefront of the government's anti-poverty struggle', Meles managed to praise them while making clear that they occupied a subsidiary position in a development strategy ultimately led by the government. Also, in the

[52] EBC Video Archives, Addis Ababa. LRR12186: 'Enat Hospital in Merhabete', Television Report.

ceremony, Böhm was given a certificate of honorary Ethiopian citizenship. This was a great honour, rarely bestowed in Ethiopia, but again made him at least theoretically a subject of the Ethiopian state, who thus fell under the authority of *mengist*.

In showing all this on television, senior regime figures likely believed that infrastructure built by MfM, such as the hospital, could contribute to their legitimating narratives not just in Merhabete but nationally. They had succeeded in locating and managing an international organisation, had situated it within a broader regime-led development strategy, and demonstrated how it could be used to bring modernity and development to rural Ethiopia.

Meles was not the only regime actor who presented MIRDP-built structures as part of the regime's drive for development. I also heard that officials had attempted to make similar arguments during the 2005 election campaign. One former MfM member of staff recalled,

> In the time of election, first in order to get votes during the campaign some political parties used to promise things that won't come. Second, during the campaign they used MfM, saying that 'we are the ones who brought them to this place'. So we in return went to the community and explained that we don't have any connection to religion and politics… There were some problems we faced with this. Government people complained about our explanation and told us to consider that MfM is working by willingness of the government.[53]

[53] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 5 February 2020.

Here was an example where the regime attempted to take credit for the work of MfM, not only in a general or vague sense but explicitly in the context of an election campaign. Notably, MfM staff felt a need to correct this, by clarifying that they did not necessarily endorse EPRDF in the election. This had apparently led to a dispute, in which the regime insisted on its ability to claim credit for the project.

While regime figures may have attempted to situate the MIRDP as part of a wider regime-led development strategy, according to most of my interlocutors, this strategy backfired. People rejected outright the suggestion that the regime should be credited for the infrastructure built by MfM. In contrast, they specifically listed all the structures built by the NGO, asserting that the regime had done nothing by comparison. A former MfM member of staff, still resident in the district, put the case:

> You know it's a lack of words just to say about Menschen [MfM]. We don't have any government here in Merhabete. As in Merhabete, as residents of Merhabete, we do have water, we do have hospital, we do have clinic, we do have road, the road to Afezez or to Yessa was constructed by Menschen… A very big burden has [been] taken by Menschen, under construction of clinics, construction of teachers' residence in rural area. Many many things has been done by Menschen whereas the government was supposed to work.[54]

[54] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 April 2019.

This kind of comparison between MfM action and government inaction was common. For example, another MfM member of staff said, ‘a hospital was built, a school was built and a road was built and everyone benefited. You could say we didn’t have a government; our government was MfM. It allocated big budgets for these. The government didn’t do anything in Merhabete except for electricity.’[55]

It was not only MfM staff who contrasted MfM’s construction of infrastructure with government neglect. For example, a farmer and former security guard commented, ‘after they [MfM] left, so many things were ruined. This year was the first time the school was maintained. God bless them that they built the school for the *kebele*.’[56] A former government official from the *wereda* health office said ‘To tell you the truth, Menschen has worked and covered the health work in the *wereda* more than the government did.’[57] Even two serving policemen contrasted the diligence of MfM with regime disregard. One said ‘Since they [MfM] left, the government almost forgot the *wereda*,’[58] while another said ‘More than the government – it was Karl [Böhm] who did things.’[59]

Based on the existing literature, I had expected to find that MfM’s construction of infrastructure in Merhabete would be understood as subsumed within the broader regime project of ‘taking state-led development to the people’ (Dodworth, 2022). However in my interviews, if anything, it was the regime which appeared to be subsumed in a development project led by MfM. A former member of a women’s project explained, ‘The

[55] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 November 2019.

[56] Interview, farmer and former security guard, 23 September 2019.

[57] Interview, former official from *wereda* health office, 28 May 2019.

[58] Interview, policeman, 21 September 2019.

[59] Interview, Policeman and former daily labourer, 26 September 2019.

mill is still there. They built a school for our children, and a water point. We are still using the water point. *All development can be traced back to Menschen*.'[60] Here the structures built by MfM were cited as evidence that the NGO, rather than the government, was the original source of development. As she elaborated:

> Everything came from them… We knew nothing back then. When they first came we used to go to the *k'olla* [lowland] desert on bare feet. Since then we are going with shoes. Now we have passed that and the car comes to our door. When Menschen came we used to grind grain by hand with a stone. Now the train is at our door. All this was done by Menschen. Who built the mill? It was Menschen. Who built the school? It was Menschen. Who gave clothes to our children? It was Menschen. After that it's just changing names but they are doing what Menschen did.[61]

This quote is intriguing because in some ways it could be seen as linking to regime narratives, but ultimately gives credit to MfM for the changes rather than the regime. It starts with repeating standard tropes about development – how people used to walk with bare feet, then with shoes, and now cars come. There is an interesting reference to the train; there is no train in Merhabete and this is likely to be a reference to the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway or the Addis Ababa Light Rail Transit. She may have seen these on a visit to Addis Ababa or through images on a phone. Yet in case there is any doubt that she is

[60] Interview, former member of women's project, 29 November 2019. Emphasis added.

[61] Interview, former member of women's project, 29 November 2019.

seeing development as a regime-led project, directly after mentioning the train, she says 'All this was done by Menschen'. She specifically asks 'who built the mill', 'the school', and so on- implying, *not* the government but MfM. At the end, in the sentence 'After that it's just changing names but they are doing what Menschen did,' there is scope to see the regime as doing good developmental work – but they are seen as following the example of the originator of development, which is MfM.

What was even more notable than MfM being seen as the source of development was the fact that it was identified by many interviewees as a kind of alternative or substitute for *mengist* (government or state). The MfM staff quoted earlier in this section stated that 'we don't have any government here in Merhabete' and that 'our government was MfM'. This was a common perception: in building developmental structures, MfM was seen as having fulfilled *mengist*'s responsibilities better than *mengist* itself. In one particularly striking example, a former model farmer argued, 'the constitution of Ethiopia clearly states the government [*mengist*] is responsible to build infrastructure, but in the case of Merhabete it was Karl. Karl did what the government was supposed to do.'[62] For this person, delivering infrastructure was a fundamental responsibility of *mengist*. The fact that MfM built more infrastructure than the regime meant that *mengist* had failed to fulfil its duty, and MfM had stepped in to fill the void.

This viewpoint was also expressed powerfully by a woman who had received 'social support' under the project (a kind of special support for those in distress or particular

[62] Interview, business owner and former model farmer, 14 November 2019.

need; this woman had been supported following an injury in a road accident, but others included for example poor but promising students). She said:

> So 'Menschen', I mean Karl, took care of not only my kids but everyone, words can't explain, like he helped all Ethiopian people every one, he was a father of the poor. I don't get tired of talking about him. He did so many things. I mean even this hospital alone is enough; the hospital that was built is enough. If you go to remote areas, all the clinics were built by him, he went to many remote areas and built schools, he also helped them get water… I'm at a loss for words; I can't express what he meant to me… let me tell you something, a country's government, since there is a government, was supposed to be a mother and a father for the poor. But the Ethiopian government has done nothing for me, but Karl on the other hand has raised my children; he's made sure that they weren't hungry and thirsty and had clothes.[63]

In this striking account, not only is a contrast drawn between MfM action and government neglect, but 'Karl' and MfM are strongly associated with ideas of a good *mengist*, drawing on the tropes of paternal care, providence and concern for the poor which were identified as core elements of the idea of *mengist* in chapter 4. Böhm himself is identified as a personified father figure, who combines personal concern for the needy – 'a father for the

[63] Interview, former recipient of social support, 30 November 2019

poor' – with the more generalised benevolence involved in 'sending development' in the form of built structures: schools, clinics and water points.

The perception of Böhm as a father figure was often repeated in interviews: even a former *wereda* official referred to him as the 'father of Merhabete'[64] while another former MfM employee called him 'our father, Karl.'[65] Through my conversations, it became clear that he and MfM were not only seen as more generous and effective than *mengist*; they exemplified the role of a good *mengist*. In having constructed so much infrastructure, Böhm and MfM were understood as fulfilling *mengist*'s own responsibilities in a way that *mengist* itself failed to do. Böhm was seen as a paternalistic, but also modern, development-oriented authority figure. In another striking turn of phrase, a former model farmer, who had previously served as *kebele* administrator and was still working on the *kebele* at the time of the interview, asserted that MfM was 'above the government' (*ke mengist belay*).[66] In a context where *mengist* is seen as part of a socio-religious hierarchy stretching from the poor to God, the fact that someone who works for *mengist* sees MfM as above *mengist* was highly significant.

The public identification of MfM, rather than the state, as the primary source of development and as a higher authority than *mengist* had real consequences for the regime and its political dominance. Returning to the 2005 elections, where regime actors had attempted to take credit for MfM's development works, interviewees reported that this strategy backfired. As noted in chapter 4, in the run up to election day, when the regime

[64] Interview, former *wereda* government official, 27 June 2018.

[65] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 28 May 2019.

[66] Interview, *kebele* official, formerly chairperson of *kebele* development committee, 2 May 2019.

had realised it was in danger of losing the elections, it mobilised large numbers of party cadres across the whole country. *Kebele* and sub-*kebele* leaderships, development teams, and local militia were tasked with carrying out door-to-door visits asking people to sign a register committing them to vote for the EPRDF.

I heard anecdotes about this time during my conversations in Merhabete. For example, on one occasion I was walking along a rural road when I met two young men who said they were officials working for the agriculture office in the neighbouring *kebele*. When I explained that I was researching the work of Menschen für Menschen in Merhabete, without any prompting on my part, they started talking about the 2005 elections. They said they were children at the time but remembered that during the campaign, people had come round to check if everyone had their voting cards, and also wanted to ask who people were going to vote for (this seemed to be an account of *kebele* or sub-*kebele* functionaries carrying out the door-to-door campaigns). They told me the people had said they wanted to vote for Menschen für Menschen, as it had built so much infrastructure for the *wereda*.[67] This is a striking example, because the people I was talking to were serving government functionaries themselves, but did not appear to be embarrassed at the past public opposition to the regime. They had been children at the time, so whether the episode was associated with laughter or anger, it was evidently highly memorable. Also, notably, it was infrastructure which was remembered as the core explanation of why people might want to vote for MfM – or refuse to vote for EPRDF.

[67] Informal conversation, two *kebele* officials, 27 November 2019.

The idea that people had wanted to vote for Böhm or MfM at the time of the elections was repeated by other interviewees. Generally, political discussions are sensitive in rural Ethiopia and few people wanted to talk about the elections, but nonetheless I heard similar accounts from others. A former model farmer linked this to the decision of the regime to attempt to claim credit for the work of MfM. He told me, 'The problem happened when the government started to present the work of MfM as government work during the election campaign. Because of this, the people said they would elect Karl'.[68] Echoing others who had referred to MfM as a kind of alternative government, he used the expression 'our government is Karl' (*mengistaccin Karl naw*). While it is unlikely that people expected Karl or MfM could govern them, the project and its delivery of development works provided a frame of reference to express discontent with the regime. It made critique of the regime more legitimate because people could point to MfM's work as an example of what 'sending development' along the lines of regime rhetoric would actually look like – in contrast to what the regime itself had delivered.

Independent of interviews, archival evidence shows that the 2005 elections were controversial in Merhabete. Alem Ketema parliamentary constituency – which comprised the whole *wereda* of Merhabete – was one of the constituencies listed by the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) as the site of vote tampering and repression, with several detailed allegations of malpractice (Ethiopian Review, 2005). Alem Ketema was one of the 31 Parliamentary constituencies where a process of post-election investigation led to a decision to re-run the election in August 2005 (Ethiopian Herald,

[68] Interview, business owner and former model farmer, 14 November 2019.

2005). MfM staff also noticed that the situation in Merhabete was unusual. A minute of a MfM semi-annual meeting in Addis Ababa in August 2005 noted a lack of community participation in Merhabete and wondered 'if this is just a general reaction of the public linked to the elections? We will have to follow the case after the return of normality – which may take some time in Merhabete'.[69] Evidently there had been unrest in Merhabete, and it seems likely that the idea of Karlheinz Böhm and MfM as an example of a better *mengist* contributed to the relatively high level of public discontent with the regime in the area, compared with surrounding *weredas*.

Even during my own visits to Merhabete in 2018-20, when discontent with the government was again rising, MfM's work was a frequent reference point for people who wanted to highlight regime failure. At this time, popular sentiment in Amhara region was shifting towards more public opposition against first the TPLF and then also against the new leadership of Abiy Ahmed (Makahamadze and Fikade, 2022; Tazebew, 2021). On one of my visits, I experienced a call for demonstrations against the regime where a banned flag was flown (the Ethiopian tricolour minus the EPRDF star emblem). In informal conversations, people told me that PM Abiy didn't have support in the region.[70]

I was also struck by how some people were willing to express critical opinions about the regime which, based on my reading of the literature, I had expected to be rare. One woman, for example, said that she would not give her labour as part of compulsory community labour schemes unless the work was done on her own land. Her friend warned

[69] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – Midda Merha Derra 2003-06. Brief Summary and Reflections on the Semi-Annual Meeting 2005, 24 August 2005.

[70] Informal conversation, livestock farmer, 19 September 2019.

her she would be punished, but she said 'Then I'll close the house and disappear… I prefer to fall off the cliff if they don't work on my agricultural land. I don't care'.[71] It was significant, then, that at this time people often referred to the work of MfM – including especially its built structures – as an example of what a good government would do, compared to the regime which they saw as having neglected, forgotten or abandoned Merhabete. One farmer and former security guard for MfM told me that if MfM had stayed in the area, it would have developed like he had heard that Tigray had developed.[72] He implied that the regime had prioritized development in Tigray over areas like Merhabete; the MIRDP pointed the way to what *mengist* might have done in the area.

In summary, while structures built by the MIRDP increased regime reach, they had a very negative impact on regime image. In conversations around the district, references to project-built structures were frequently used to point out the regime's failure to deliver development. MfM functioned for many people as an example of what a good *mengist* would look like, and MfM buildings in the *wereda* acted to remind people of their work. This had tangible negative consequences for regime political dominance in the 2005 elections and also in the longer term.

This finding presents a puzzle. The previous chapter had argued that the MIRDP was a most likely case for a development project which should strengthen regime political dominance, in part because of the large number of buildings it constructed and transferred to the regime. This chapter has shown that – both during construction and afterwards – these buildings acted to undermine the regime's legitimating narratives, in particular its

[71] Interview, farmer and former member of spinning group, 17 November 2019.

[72] Interview, farmer and former security guard, 22 September 2019.

claim to be delivering development. The question remains, why did this 'most likely case' act to undermine regime political dominance? Specifically, why did people not credit the regime for the buildings constructed by MfM – given that in many other cases, people appear to be willing to credit governments for 'bringing in' NGOs and donor resources (see for example Springman, 2022; Dietrich et al., 2018; Brass, 2016)? The next section begins the work of answering this question, but it is one that I will continue to return to throughout the remainder of the thesis.

Billboards, statues and crumbling buildings: the other side of the MIRDP's material legacy

The reasons why people in Merhabete did not credit the regime for the work of MfM in the district are complex and not only related to the MIRDP's built structures. However, built structures are an important starting point. This chapter has already shown that, alongside well-maintained school blocks, clinics and roads, the hospital and the TVET college, ten years after closure the material legacy of the project included a crumbling livestock centre, gutted veterinary clinics and non-functional water points. Ruins like these acted as a reminder of the fact that MfM had delivered services which the regime could not maintain. This was awkward for the regime. For example, Image 4 above (page 136) shows the empty shell that was the veterinary clinic in Remesht *kebele*. When I visited that area I met the local *kebele* administrator, who was very helpful and gave his time for an interview. As I was leaving, however, he asked the person who was showing me round the area *not* to show me the veterinary clinic, indicating that officials in 2019 were embarrassed by its condition as it reflected badly on the regime.

The Amden Livestock centre, part of which is shown in image 5 (page 137), was also a potential source of embarrassment to the regime. According to one interviewee, a former MfM member of staff, during the handover phase state officials had urged MfM to remove the entire livestock centre, together with its 'poultry production, incubator and all the machines' to a neighbouring *wereda* where MfM was still operating.[73] This suggests that officials were aware that they would be unable to maintain the service provided by the livestock centre, but that it had value for the people of Merhabete and would be missed. If it was located in the neighbouring *wereda*, people from Merhabete might be able to access its services. Perhaps also, if MfM equipment was not located in Merhabete but elsewhere, this would make the regime's inability to continue to provide these services less obvious.

MfM refused to move the livestock centre to the neighbouring *wereda*, and it was formally transferred to the local government in Merhabete. For some time, the buildings and specialised equipment were abandoned. However, a former official from the *wereda* agriculture office described how he then tried to get the centre working again:

> I thought Menschen did a lot of things and I had to restart that. So I started the Amden chicken rearing… I took on a little budget and started maintaining the centre… I used to know very well what Menschen did before – I wanted to restore it… We worked on it – we were trying to make everything live again… After Menschen left, most of the things they did on agriculture were

[73] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 6 February 2020.

> lost… [but later, after his efforts] We sold around 500,000 chickens from the beginning. The farmers' demand for it was very high.[74]

This interview was notable as the official explicitly placed the regime in the role of *following* the work of MfM, rather than guiding or directing it. This is partly explained by the fact that he is referring to a period after project closure, but nonetheless MfM's work is seen as something to emulate rather than something to be directed towards regime goals. The anecdote also indicates that officials were aware of the potential for the MfM buildings to promote agricultural development, and consequently to boost or tarnish the regime's image.

Another prominent aspect of the material legacy of the project was the existence of a range of billboards and signs around the district bearing the MfM logo. In many *kebeles*, billboards remained from the various campaigns that MfM had run during implementation. Two are shown below in Images 6 and 7 (page 160). They are constructed of metal and were covered with rust at the time of my visit. Despite the rust, the distinctive blue and white logo of MfM is still legible. These billboards demonstrate how MfM sought to guide people's behaviour in the district, echoing tropes of trusteeship discussed in chapter 3.

[74] Interview, former *wereda* government official, 7 January 2020.



Image 6: MfM billboard, Fetra kebele. Caption in Amharic: 'The game of youth is sweet, but has consequences.' Photograph credit: Abel Assefa, 20 September 2019.



Image 7: MfM billboard, Zeita kebele. Caption in Amharic: 'If you were a woman, would you do this?'
Author's Photograph, 29 May 2019.

One billboard was part of a campaign against early marriage. Its message, ‘the game of youth is sweet but has consequences,’ brings across the element of paternal care with which MfM became associated. MfM is encouraging people not to marry too early, but in the process it is situating itself in the role of a responsible parent or father figure – similar to the role identified for Karlheinz Böhm earlier in this chapter. The second billboard was part of a campaign to challenge traditional gender attitudes. It shows a picture of a man carrying wood on his head and a baby on his back with the caption ‘if you were a woman would you do this?’ Again, this assumes that MfM had superior knowledge to local people about which gender attitudes were modern and correct.

These were just two of the billboards that I found around various parts of the *wereda*. Others also expressed notions of trusteeship inherent in development projects. For example, there were billboards recommending family planning (‘Let’s use condoms for successful family planning’), some raising awareness regarding HIV (‘HIV is not transmitted by eating together, talking, or shaking hands’) and others which sought to encourage people to use iodized salt (‘How to prevent goitre? For you and your children's health, use only iodized salt every day.’). In all these billboards, MfM took on the role of the wise trustee or parent, who knows what is good for people even if they do not know it themselves. Ten years after closure, these acted as visible reminders of the work of MfM and the paternal care which it had shown towards Ethiopian citizens. While in Europe and North America, such instructions towards citizens have become seen as overbearing, for many people in rural Ethiopia, the concern displayed by development actors over people’s eating habits, toilet habits and so on, is often seen positively.

MfM's name and logo were also visible in many other places in Merhabete. For example, various schools and clinics built with MfM support still had MfM's name or logo on their official signs. Image 8 below shows the sign at Fetra Kindergarten, which announces that it was built by MfM with support from 'Arthur Andersen Consult Switzerland.' Image 9 on page 163 shows the sign at the Ethio-Millennium Elementary School in Alem Ketema. It has an official government sign but with a small oval inset in white and blue – the colours of the MfM logo – which state that it was built by MfM in 1999.[75] These signs, and others like them, are scattered around the *wereda* and act as another reminder of the fact that the extensive infrastructure of schools and clinics owe their existence to MfM.



Image 8: Sign at Fetra Kindergarten. Author's Photograph, 12 November 2019.

[75] The date refers to the Ethiopian calendar, equivalent to 2007 in the Western calendar, towards the end of the project.



Image 9: Sign at Ethio-Millennium Elementary School, Alem Ketema. Inset: close-up of MfM logo, stating 'Built by People for People organisation [MfM], 1999'. Author's Photograph, 12 November 2019.

The ubiquitous nature of the white and blue signs in the district was commented on during project implementation by a visiting young journalist from Germany. Rouven Rech was awarded a scholarship from the Heinz-Kühn-Foundation and spent 3 months in Ethiopia in 2006. He spent some of his time visiting the Merhabete project and wrote in his report:

> Of course, I'm impressed by the assistance that "Menschen für Menschen" is providing here, but I'm a little shocked by how many white signs with blue lettering are posted along the roadside. Whether it's the elementary school, the hospital, the well, or other facilities, the residents owe everything to the

> caring Karlheinz Böhm… After a while, my driver simply refers to the place as “Menschen für Menschen” Town. (Rech, 2006: 225, author's translation)

This gives an impression of the extent of billboards and signs during implementation. At the time of my visit they were hardly any less, although rusting. It is interesting to note that the image of Karlheinz Böhm as ‘caring’ was also conveyed at that time, and the suggestion that Alem Ketema could be referred to as ‘Menschen für Menschen Town’ brings across the sense of the NGO as an alternative authority in the district.

One group of project-built structures which was *not* branded with the MfM logo was the set of former MfM project offices and staff residences which were transferred from MfM to the regime on project closure. There were no visible reminders of MfM on these buildings and I would not have known of their previous function had people not told me of their history. Some of these buildings had new signs showing their current function for the government, for example the former main MfM office in Alem Ketema, which is now the *wereda* agriculture office, and the former training centre which is now an Alem Ketema *kebele* office. In rural areas, the former MfM buildings that I encountered, now used as *kebele* offices, have no signs on them at all. So whilst the MfM name and logo have a significant visual presence across Merhabete, this is not the case with the element of the project that gave the most significant boost to regime reach.

A final aspect of the project’s material legacy was the presence of two statues of Karlheinz Böhm in Alem Ketema. One, a bust, is in the hospital, whilst on a main road intersection there is a large statue of Böhm with a plaque reading ‘Karl square’ in Amharic (Image 10 on page 165). The statue shows Böhm standing with two children: he has his

hand on the shoulder of a boy and is carrying a girl. This represents him in the role of a caring father which again fits closely to the way he was described in interviews as the 'father of Merhabete' or 'father of the poor', which also link to the tropes of a good *mengist* as a caring father identified by Daniel Mulugeta. The statue's effects go beyond those of billboards and signs: this is not just a reminder to people of the previous role of MfM in the area, but literally puts Böhm on a pedestal, honouring him and holding him up as a father of the district.



Image 10: Statue of Karlheinz Böhm at 'Karl Square' in Alem Ketema. Author's Photograph, 31 May 2019.

As stated on the pedestal, the statue was erected by the chief administrator's office of Alem Ketema town in 2001 in the Ethiopian Calendar (2009 in the Gregorian – just as

MfM was ending its work in the district). This is important, as it suggests that officials thought it was politically advisable to honour Böhm as the project closed. This raises the question of the extent to which officials in Merhabete were aware at the time of the negative effects of the project on regime image, and the way people refused to give the regime credit for structures built by MfM. Drawing on interviews and archives, it appears that at first, officials were concerned mainly with regime reach, and were not worried about any negative effects of the project on regime image. They invested a lot of time in discussing with MfM staff where infrastructural facilities should be built, the specifications required and so on, as described above. They assumed that people would credit the regime for works done by MfM, as they saw themselves as the senior overseers of development work in the district.

However, later on in project implementation, especially after the 2005 elections, officials appear to have changed their tactics. Around the elections themselves, as noted above, officials had attempted to present the work of MfM as part of a wider regime-driven development strategy, but this backfired. It is likely that local officials realised at this time that some people's opposition to the regime was linked to a sense that MfM had performed better in the district. After 2005, relations between officials and MfM staff in the district soured; some interviewees suggested that the *wereda* government had actively pushed MfM to leave the area. One former model farmer suggested officials wanted MfM to leave 'because people like Karl more than the government'[76] while a former member

[76] Interview, business owner and former model farmer, 14 November 2019.

of staff suggested it was 'because they thought that it [MfM] was messing with their politics.'[77]

Whatever the regime was doing in private, in public it continued to honour Böhm and MfM. In 2008, as the project was winding down, two streets in Alem Ketema were named after Karlheinz Böhm and Meles Zenawi respectively (Ethiopian News Agency, 2008). Potentially, this could be seen as a small concession from the previous position: here it is implied that both Böhm and Meles were jointly responsible for developments in the district.

In 2009, just when MfM was finishing up its work in Merhabete, the statue of Böhm was erected on 'Karl square'. By this point, only Böhm was honoured, and not jointly with Meles. Officials appear to have decided that in order to keep in step with the public mood, it was expedient to situate the government also in the role of grateful recipient of support from Böhm and MfM. This may be linked to an awareness that Böhm was immensely popular in Merhabete and it would be advisable to attempt to associate the regime with him rather than leave the public with the impression that there was a rift between them. This would also explain why former MfM signs and billboards were not removed, even if these had the effect of reminding people in the district of the work that MfM had done in the *wereda*. While officials could legitimately replace the signs for MfM offices which were converted into government offices as their function had changed, removing references to MfM in signs for schools and clinics, or MfM billboards, might have further provoked anti-regime sentiment.

[77] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 November 2019.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the structures built by the MIRDP have a deeply ambiguous political legacy. In summary, project-built structures extended the regime's reach in the district while undermining its image. Project structures dramatically expanded the regime's network of buildings and roads across Merhabete. They allowed it to access rural areas more easily and implement strategies for political dominance more effectively. One type of project-built structure was especially useful in underpinning regime reach: the network of buildings constructed originally for MfM staff which were later handed to the regime on project closure. Without setting out to do so, MfM provided the *wereda* government with an agriculture office and many rural *kebele* administrations with local offices. These indicate the importance of considering structures built by development agencies for their own uses – something which is overlooked in much of the literature on development projects.

In contrast to this, project-built structures had a negative impact on regime image. When people referred to these structures in interviews, they almost always inferred that MfM had shown care and concern for the people of Merhabete, whereas the regime had 'forgotten' the *wereda*. Officials, including very senior regime figures, attempted to enrol the structures of the MIRDP into regime legitimating narratives. For example, PM Meles Zenawi used the opening of the Alem Ketema Enat Hospital to attempt to situate MfM as a foot soldier in a regime-led development campaign. But people rejected these narratives, suggesting that the vast number of buildings MfM had constructed in the district showed that in fact MfM was the origin and source of development, not the regime.

Characterisations of Karlheinz Böhm as a ‘father of Merhabete’ or ‘father of the poor’ were common, repeating tropes associated with a good *mengist* (government or state) which delivers development. Even some officials acknowledged that they took inspiration from the work of MfM, situating themselves in a position of followers rather than directors or overseers of the NGO’s development work.

The chapter argued this represents a puzzle. In other cases of development projects in the literature, it is commonly suggested that people give credit to governments for the work done by development agencies – seeing them as ‘a resource that powerful government actors control’ (Springman, 2022: 523). Why did this not happen in the case of the MIRDP – especially as it was a most likely case for a project which strengthened regime political dominance? The chapter suggested that part of the answer lies in the project’s material legacy. In addition to smart new school blocks and a hospital, the project left behind a network of rusting billboards with the MfM logo, crumbling ruins of former project buildings, and statues honouring Karlheinz Böhm. These acted to remind people of the work of MfM in the district, and give the impression of the capacity and generosity of the NGO which the regime was unable to maintain.

The regime itself shifted its tactics considerably as it slowly realised the impact of the project not only on regime reach but also regime image. For most of project implementation, officials focused on maximising regime reach. They worked hard to achieve this: for example, negotiating with MfM staff about the location and specifications of new structures such as school blocks, and subjecting the project to regular formal evaluations. They focused most energy on those facilities which would add more

significantly to regime reach (schools, clinics, the hospital) and deprioritised those which would have less impact on reach (water points, veterinary clinics, the livestock centre).

Regarding regime image, officials appear to have been caught out at the time of the 2005 elections and had to change their strategy. They had assumed that they could take credit for the work of MfM, but this was evidently a misjudgement and likely increased anti-regime sentiment in the district. After the elections, relations between the project and the regime became more tense. At the same time, MfM's popularity locally was such that the regime had to acknowledge this and honour Böhm publicly, including by erecting a statute of him in Alem Ketema at the time the project closed in 2009.

This chapter has presented a partial explanation for why people did not credit the regime for the work of MfM: the project's material legacy of MfM signs and billboards, statues and crumbling buildings. However, these do not give the full picture. In order to understand the popularity of Karlheinz Böhm in Merhabete, and the reasons why people saw him as the origin of development, we also need to understand the way MfM distributed resources in the district and legitimated its own work, and the long-term implications of these practices. The next two chapters turn to these important aspects of the MIRDP's political legacy.

Chapter 6: MIRDP's resource flows and their political legacy

Complementing the previous chapter's analysis of built structures, this chapter reviews the MIRDP's distribution of movable resources, and their consequences for the EPRDF regime's political dominance. By 'movable' resources, I mean all those which were not converted into 'immovable' structures like roads and buildings; this includes cash (for example in the form of daily allowances and salaries) and in-kind distributions, such as agricultural inputs, drugs and medical supplies, furniture, clothes and so on. The chapter analyses the extent to which these resources were captured by the regime and integrated into its patronage networks. In rural Amhara region, this meant integration into strategies of coercive distribution, since the regime sought to engender mass acquiescence to its rule in these areas rather than co-opting elite groups.

Drawing on the analysis in chapters 3 and 4, my assumption was that the resource flows of the MIRDP would have been captured by the regime. Given the regime's general suspicion of NGOs and its desire to centralise rents and avoid 'pluralism of patronage' (Zenawi, 2006: 36), and given that existing accounts in the literature suggest NGO support went only to those on government lists (Lavers, 2024: 244), I expected that the MIRDP would likely have been captured and its resources incorporated into regime patronage networks. This was made even more likely because Karlheinz Böhm and MfM sought close relations with officials from the PM downwards, and because MfM was celebrated as an NGO which was delivering development in a 'responsible' way.

Contrary to these assumptions, I found that many resource streams were not controlled by officials locally. Whilst they managed to develop significant control over trainee selection, and took ownership of in-kind resources provided directly to the state such as furniture and equipment for the hospital and TVET college, their control over other resource flows was limited. MfM largely had autonomy over agricultural inputs, emergency assistance, and recruitment of staff. I suggest this was because local officials could not practically maintain control over all distribution processes. The scale of MfM resource distribution was too great for the regime to supervise everything, and officials prioritised supervision of built structures (reviewed in the last chapter) and resources which were relatively easy to control with limited staff time – particularly training. Significant resource streams were therefore distributed by the project to people that were not necessarily regime allies – including especially staff, some of whom had previously served with the Derg regime and lost their jobs after the change of government.

The most significant consequences of this came over the longer term. Certain groups of people who were not predisposed to support EPRDF built up resources through the project which were still discernible at the time I visited, ten years after closure. In particular, former MfM staff and former ‘model farmers’ (those who MfM selected as most promising farmers, who were expected to demonstrate the value of new farming techniques to their neighbours) had used resources acquired during project implementation to build houses and develop new income sources. These gave these groups a degree of material independence from state-controlled resource streams, which in turn meant that they were less susceptible to regime strategies of coercive distribution. Material independence translated into political independence. It also led them to credit

MfM and Karlheinz Böhm for their livelihoods, making them more sceptical about the regime's developmentalist legitimating narratives. This provides part of the answer to the puzzle identified in the previous chapter: some of the people who were most likely to critique the regime's neglect of the *wereda* were former staff and model farmers. These influential groups significantly weakened regime political dominance in Merhabete, because their material independence meant they could avoid encadrement and were able to criticise the regime with limited fear of reprisal.

The chapter is structured in two parts. I first review how various different streams of resources were distributed at the time of implementation, including training; direct transfers to officials and state institutions; agricultural inputs; 'social support' to individuals in need; and salaries and wages. In the second section, I then review the long-term consequences of project resource flows, focusing on two important groups of people who built up resources through the project: former staff and model farmers. The analysis reviews how these groups affected local social structure, how they propagated narratives about MfM, and the consequences for regime political dominance.

Resource distribution and regime control during implementation

The extent of the inflows of resources into Merhabete as a result of the MIRDP was considerable. According to the final evaluation of the project, it spent over 31 million Euro in the district over the total period of implementation, which represented over 1.5 million

Euro per year.[78] Budgets increased throughout the implementation period, and in the last few years of implementation, reached 25.3 million Ethiopian Birr (ETB – approx. €2.5m) in 2005, 40.2 million ETB (€4m) in 2006, and 24.8 million ETB (€2.5 million) in 2007.[79] Whilst this level of funding is not especially large for development projects in general, it is unusual for a project of this size to operate in such a limited geographical area.

This amount of annual spending was likely substantially more than the Merhabete *wereda* government budget. The 2009 evaluation stated that the project 'allocated relatively huge budget for the district (more than 10 times of the district government budget).'[80] It is hard to be sure exactly what this refers to; for example it may refer to the *wereda* agriculture budget or to the entire budget of the *wereda* government. It may also only refer to the last few years of implementation, when MfM had significantly increased the scale of its support as it built large numbers of school blocks. Actual figures for *wereda* spending in Merhabete at this time were unavailable, although UNICEF provides some figures for Amhara region at the time of project closure which can be used for comparison. It records that in 2007/08 the average aggregate regional government spending in the Amhara region of Ethiopia was 220 ETB per capita per year (UNICEF, 2018). If resources were spent equally across all *weredas* this would suggest 28.6 million ETB would have

[78] MfM Addis Ababa archives. KDA Management Consultancy, 'Menschen Fuer Menschen Foundation (MFMF): Impact Assessment of Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP)' October 2009, p. 37.

[79] Ethiopian Birr figures taken from 'Menschen für Menschen, Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project, Terminal Report for the Project Period 2005-2007, March 2008'. An approximate historical exchange rate of €1 = 10 ETB is used for convenience. Based on searches on xe.com, the actual rate fluctuated between 9 and 12 ETB per Euro over the period 2003-07.

[80] MfM Addis Ababa Archives. KDA Management Consultancy, 'Menschen Fuer Menschen Foundation (MFMF): Impact Assessment of Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP), October 2009', 137.

been spent in Merhabete that year, based on a *wereda* population of 130,000, which would be similar to the MIRDP's 24.8 million ETB. However, around 40% of Amhara regional spending was spent at bureau level in 2007/08, leaving 60% for *weredas*. It is also likely that urban weredas would have spent more per capita than rural ones. Whatever the precise numbers, evidently the MIRDP was a major investment locally and may have had a budget which was several times larger than that of the local government.

The sheer scale of the project's resources was impressive to people locally. Many people spoke about how they were amazed by the capacities of MfM. One woman, a former member of an MfM women's project, gave a sense of how the project became seen as a windfall, a source of unexpected wealth, to many people:

> We still say that whenever we get abundant money, 'it's like Menschen times'. We use it as a term, we'd say 'somebody has Menschen now' when they get a lot of money or a big harvest, say 'it's become Menschen for him'.[81]

The vast scale of MfM's resources in the eyes of the people of the *wereda* is very apparent in this quote. MfM is literally translated as meaning wealth and money. It is not surprising, therefore, that many people tried to access the resources of MfM during implementation. Officials also sought to influence these significant resource flows and align them with regime strategies for dominance.

[81] Interview, former member of women's project, 29 November 2019.

In the sub-sections below, I review how successful officials were in controlling or influencing the distribution of various categories of expenditure during project implementation. Later in this chapter, I review the long-term consequences of these resource distribution practices, which ultimately had the most significant effects on regime political dominance.

Training

The MIRDP trained a large number of people: over 23,000, according to the 2009 evaluation of the project, or around a fifth of the total district population at the time of implementation.[82] Training courses covered a huge range of topics from poultry production to beekeeping to soil conservation, from water and sanitation practices to sewing courses, from savings and credit schemes to health and nutrition advice and HIV awareness. MfM constructed a purpose-built training centre in Alem Ketema and also sent many people on study tours to other parts of Ethiopia to observe particular agricultural techniques.

Training involved generous daily allowances when compared with local wage rates: for example in a training course for farmers in 1994, the 35 participants were paid 10 Birr per day for a total of 91 days.[83] By comparison, the 'man-day pay rate' on an MfM irrigation

[82] MfM Addis Ababa archives. KDA Management Consultancy, 'Menschen Fuer Menschen Foundation (MFMF): Impact Assessment of Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP)' October 2009. The figure of 23,000 trained is quoted in this report (p.130), but the figures mentioned in different sub sections of the same report add up to more than 23,000 (over 25,000 were reported as trained on agriculture and soil conservation alone, for example). It is likely that the 23,000 figure includes an allowance for the same people receiving multiple trainings.

[83] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – Merhabete File No 2B, From 1994 to Dec 1996. Farmers' Training Proposal in Agroecology, August 31, 1994.

scheme at around the same time, in 1995, was 6 Birr per day,[84] while a researcher visiting the area in 1996 listed daily labour rates as mostly between 3 and 7 Birr.[85] Training, with its daily allowance, was therefore one of the resources that was most contested locally, with many people attempting to access it. In interviews, while some people said they learned useful things during training, many suggested that the allowance was the main benefit.

For example, a former member of staff tasked with implementing MfM's savings and credit scheme for women complained that 'women wanted to be selected for more trainings just to receive the money.'[86] One woman I spoke to, when asked if a training she attended had made a difference, replied 'It was not much, it was like 130 Birr'.[87] The question had been intended to ask if the content of the training had helped her in any way, but she assumed she was being asked how much money she had received. Another woman, a former member of a MfM women's project, told me 'I went and ate a seminar in Alem Ketema. They took me with a car and I went and ate a seminar'.[88] This suggests a degree of cynicism, that the benefit of training was the allowance. Another woman expressed this view powerfully, noting that the content of the training she attended was of no use, but she invested the allowance in a more permanent resource:

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[84] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – Merhabete File No 2B, From 1994 to Dec 1996. Wonchit Irrigation Proposal, 14 March 1995.

[85] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Una Hombrecher, 'Women's Coping Strategies in Merhabete - a comparison between women of different social rank', May 1996, passim.

[86] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 28 May 2019.

[87] Interview, bar owner, 27 November 2019.

[88] Interview, former member of women's project, 29 November 2019.

> They were dedicated; they used to go round to register tea and coffee shops. They looked at our houses, the tea shops, how they are administered, if things are neatly stacked on the shelves, the glasses and so on. It was not about business; they were just looking if things were neat. How the glasses are put on the shelves. How could you miss that when you are a woman? Even men these days can look and put glasses on shelves. This is what they were teaching and it was like nothing. But I bought something with the money from the training as a reminder of the training.[89]

The last point – buying something with training allowance money – was a common theme for many interviewees. People were acutely aware that attending an MfM training course represented something of a windfall, and it would be prudent to invest the money in something longer lasting, for fear the benefit would quickly disappear. Many people therefore invested their training allowance in things like coffee tables, chickens or oxen. This was also recognised by MfM staff: attendees at poultry production trainings were given chickens in place of their daily allowance,[90] while beekeeping trainings used the allowance to give trainees modern beehives.[91]

Officials at *wereda* and especially *kebele* level were able to exercise significant influence over this important resource stream, as revealed to me in interviews. Often, officials were involved themselves as trainers in MfM training courses and were

[89] Interview, bar owner, 27 November 2019.

[90] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

[91] Interview, former *wereda* government official, 30 November 2019.

recompensed for this.[92] Regarding selection of trainees at *kebele* level, the influence of officials was significant. A former MfM member of staff involved in agricultural programmes in *kebeles* explained how trainee selection worked:

> At *kebele* level, you have the chairman. You have health officer. You have, you know, different elder, you have different structure there that implement the government's plan. We work also with them. We discuss. So, to select trainees, you have to talk with the chairman. Even the elders, you have also the elders, you have these religious leaders, church leaders. With them, who shall be select […] So, we recruit or we select the trainees in collaboration with the *kebele*, chairman, elders, religious leaders [...] Use the different structure of the government. You agree to the individual then you tell with an official letter, you sign and seal.[93]

This account illustrates how many different actors had to be consulted in selecting trainees, likely reflecting widespread awareness of training allowances being an important income source. Not only various party-state officials but also elders and religious leaders had to have their say. Nonetheless the last word went to *kebele* functionaries who had to 'sign and seal' the list of trainees. The final role of officials in approving trainee selection – 'sealing' or 'stamping' – was mentioned in other interviews also. Another former member of staff recalled: 'Even the *kebele* development agents of the government stamp for me,

[92] Interview, former *wereda* government official, 30 November 2019.

[93] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 7 November 2019.

"We confirm that he is the right person to [do] conservation training, irrigation training, water training as a committee [member]."'[94]

In some cases, the *kebele* had to approve training participants based on an assessment of their poverty. This was explained by a woman who was selected to attend a training course on sewing:

> When I heard that MfM would give training and job opportunities I got registered. After I registered there was a test – I passed. The test was not a big test; it was a life history test. The idea was to give priority to less fortunate people. In order to pass the exam we might lie – but the *kebele* knows all about us and they provided a support letter about all of our life conditions. […] There were lots of people who registered, so MfM asked the *kebele* to elaborate on the life condition of the people.[95]

This again illustrates the role of *kebele* functionaries as gatekeepers to MfM support. Anyone keen to access MfM resources would need to maintain good relations with the *kebele* or risk being excluded.

The extent to which officials' influence over trainee selection translated into increased regime political dominance depended on whether officials followed regime priorities in selecting trainees (for example loyalty to the party, avoiding public dissent) or simply developed their own personal patronage networks. In both interviews and archives, there

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[94] Interview, MfM member of staff, 3 May 2019.

[95] Interview, teacher at TVET college, 25 November 2019.

were accounts of officials sending themselves or relatives to trainings. One interviewee said that he did not get any training because he was not on the *kebele* at the time, implying that training was mainly for *kebele* members.[96] An elder who was involved in trainee selection objected to the way others acted, saying 'When you tell them to choose people for training, they [*kebele* officials] pick their brother, or their sister or their in-laws or some other relatives.'[97] Participants in focus groups for the 2009 evaluation of the project alleged that '*Kebele* or Village Development Committee leaderships … nominate their own friends or relatives [for training] secretly and submit to MIRDP officers'.[98]

These excerpts point to the tension between regime patronage networks and individuals' personal clientelist ties. It is likely that officers on the *kebele* had a certain amount of leeway to be able to reward personal friends and relatives with selection for training courses. However, the process was still subject to oversight from higher-level officials and party cadres. More senior officials were aware that a position on the *kebele* could be used as a means of indirect income generation.[99] But *kebele* members owed their position to the regime and could be disciplined or removed by their seniors if they were seen to act against it. *Kebele* officials would therefore not be able to distribute patronage to anyone who visibly opposed or ignored regime directives, and could come

[96] Interview, farmer with family members, 1 May 2019.

[97] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019. Another interviewee, a security guard (not for MfM), also said that kebele members would take support for themselves or family members. 3 May 2019.

[98] MfM Addis Ababa Archives. KDA Management Consultancy, 'Menschen Fuer Menschen Foundation (MFMF): Impact Assessment of Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRDP)' October 2009, 142.

[99] See Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003, 42.

under pressure to include or exclude certain individuals through pressure from others in the party.

Finally, while the degree of oversight of *kebele* functionaries over trainee selection was significant, it was not complete. As mentioned above, religious leaders and elders also had a say. In one interesting account, an elder told me that he had been excluded from the list of trainees by the local *kebele* administrator. MfM staff then came to him, as they knew he was very engaged with the project, and asked him why he was not on the list. He was shocked that he had not been consulted on selection and not only added himself to the list of attendees but corrected the list, striking off some of the people added by *kebele* officials, who he argued did not deserve to be included, and adding others who he said had been more involved in the project, for example giving their labour for road construction.[100] This illustrates the degree of contestation around training allowances, illustrates and also shows that regime control was less complete than some of the literature might suggest. The regime shared its control to some extent with other actors, such as elders, locally.

Despite this caveat, overall, training and its allowances were subject to significant influence by the regime and likely provided a boost to strategies of coercive distribution locally. While regime control over trainee selection was not complete, nonetheless selection was subject to considerable influence by officials and was likely almost as well controlled by the regime as state resource flows such as emergency assistance under

[100] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

the PSNP. This was not the case for all MIRDP resources, as will be seen below – but firstly I review another set of expenditures which were well controlled by officials.

Direct transfers to officials and state institutions

Whilst the MIRDP paid hardly any money into state systems, certain resources under the project were provided directly either to state institutions or to individual officials. Many of the buildings constructed by MfM were provided with furniture and equipment, including the hospital and the TVET college. These represented significant outlays. For example, 3.1 million Birr (approx. €310,000) was spent on medical equipment for Alem Ketema Enat Hospital in 2003, while 7.8 million Birr (~€780,000) was spent on tools and equipment supply for the TVET college in 2006. In addition to these one-off transfers, newly constructed school blocks were also furnished: from 2005-07, 4.1 million Birr (~€410,000) was spent on furniture for schools. These transfers added to the ability of built structures to extend regime reach, as outlined in the previous chapter. The project also provided drugs and other medical supplies to state health systems. This varied from year to year; the greatest amount was in 2003, the year the hospital was built, when the project provided 175,000 Birr (~€17,500) worth of drugs to health facilities, in addition to the 567,000 Birr (~€56,700) worth of drugs provided to the hospital.[101] Given that many state resources were subject to strategies of coercive distribution, this may also have applied to drugs, though I found no direct evidence of this.

[101] All figures from 'Menschen für Menschen, Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project, Terminal Report for the Year 2003-04, November 2004' and 'Menschen für Menschen, Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project, Terminal Report for the Project Period 2005-2007, March 2008'. An approximate historical exchange rate of 10 ETB per Euro is used for convenience.

MfM also provided various officials in the *wereda* with 'top-up' payments and allowances. Top-up payments were paid by MfM on top of officials' formal salaries to encourage people with higher qualifications or skills to serve in the district when they might otherwise decide to leave. These were provided to certain senior doctors in the hospital, for example. Daily allowances were also paid to officials engaged on services which were prioritised by MfM, for example under the Expanded Programme of Immunisation where health officials visited various rural parts of the *wereda* to conduct immunisation programmes.

The use of top payments and allowances was originally planned to be a much more important part of the MIRDP expenditure than it ended up being in main phase of implementation. The original 1987 project plan envisaged implementation operating almost entirely through the state. It proposed the project would support the *wereda* agriculture bureau to recruit an additional 78 people, including 45 development agents (DAs). The salaries for these people would be paid by the government, but MfM would pay training and allowances, and would build residences for them in their rural areas of work.[102] Government DAs would be responsible for providing agricultural extension services, for example fertiliser and improved seeds and animals.

This mode of operation was tried for a while, once the programme started full operations after the transfer of power to EPRDF. However, MfM soon took the decision to stop operating through government DAs and instead to recruit its own. According to MfM

[102] Menschen für Menschen (MfM), 'Programme Document: Merhabete Integrated Conservation and Development Programme – First 5-Year Phase, December 1987', pp. 17 and 38. Available online at https://boris-portal.unibe.ch/entities/publication/ce3ffb08-6931-456d-82fd-3e8b9a7d8601/full. Accessed 14 November 2025.

staff, this was because government DAs did not 'have the knowledge and the skill to convince the community'[103] or because they had other political duties, such as tax collection and recruitment to the military.[104] Officials were furious, but did not prevent MfM from making this change. For a while, MfM and the government divided up catchment areas: MfM would be responsible for certain areas and government for others. Eventually, this too was stopped and MfM eventually developed collaborative relations with officials in *kebeles*. Nonetheless, this demonstrates that, at least in the 1990s, the regime's power to force MfM to implement certain resource distribution practices was limited.

In summary, MfM's resource transfers to state institutions and officials provided a modest additional boost to regime political dominance in the district. Provision of furniture and equipment to schools, the hospital and the TVET clinic provided useful support to the regime strategy of increasing its reach. Top-up payments and allowances offered the potential for senior officials to increase internal discipline, for example by rewarding loyal employees by allocating them to duties where allowances were payable, while excluding those seen as troublemakers. However, as these payments were not distributed in wider society, they had limited value in strategies of coercive distribution.

Agricultural inputs

As shown in chapter 4 above, agricultural inputs were an important element in regime strategies for political dominance, so I expected MIRDP agricultural inputs would have

[103] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 18 April 2019.

[104] Interview, MfM member of staff, 22 February 2019.

been a resource stream which the regime sought to control. In practice, however, officials had much less control over their distribution than I expected. The reason why this transpired was largely due to the system by which MfM distributed most agricultural inputs, which was based on the concept of the 'model farmer'. The project transferred many resources to these individuals. At the time of my visits, they were an influential group, many of whom were prominent proponents of the narratives I referenced in the previous chapter about how MfM had been more effective at delivering development than the regime. This section sets out how distribution to model farmers functioned during implementation; I look at the long-term consequences later in this chapter.

As noted in the previous section, when MfM decided not to work through state development agents (DAs) in Merhabete, it employed a cadre of its own DAs to provide agricultural extension services. The approach involved DAs identifying and working with promising individual farmers who were expected to take on new agricultural techniques as 'models' for the local community, eventually convincing their neighbours to do the same.

The requirement for model farmers to be making better use of their land than their peers tended to mean that they were some of the better off farmers of the district. Most (though not all) agricultural inputs distributed by MfM were provided to model farmers. These included seeds and seedlings for new crop varieties, including higher yielding varieties of existing crops and new cash crops such as mango and papaya, and new breeds of animals such as larger chickens which laid more eggs, and cows which produced more milk. Model farmers were also expected to be models in terms of soil and

water conservation, and were therefore encouraged to build terraces, treat gullies, and plant trees and grasses which fixed the soil and improved its quality.

The 'model farmer' approach had already been used in previous integrated rural development projects in Ethiopia, notably the Swedish-sponsored Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit in the 1960s and 70s (Cohen, 1987: 70-109). However, it was not in line with regime agricultural strategies in the 1990s, which under the strategy of Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization were focused on mass distribution of inputs such as seeds and fertiliser. This added to the tension between MfM and the regime at this time, when relations were already strained due to the NGO's decision not to work through regime DAs. As one MfM member of staff recalled:

> the government of course - there are extension service, there are agricultural experts there… but their approach was just holistic, you know, they don't approach individuals, they just approach the whole *kebele*… Sometimes, even, we faced a challenge because we approached individuals. You know, the political system sometimes interferes. Whenever you approach them individually, and as *Yihadig* [EPRDF] was very much sensitive in political issues… they were just watching like a watchdog.[105]

This account shows how officials were aware of the political sensitivities of providing resources to certain individuals and not to others. However, the regime's reactions to this

[105] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 6 February 2020

approach changed over time. Initially, officials tolerated the approach but with a high degree of scepticism, attempting to supervise and control it as far as they could. Later, starting in the early years of the new century and accelerating after the 2005 elections, EPRDF itself adopted a version of the model farmer system, including through a significant increase in the number of government DAs. Before 2005 the regime's approach bore some similarities with MfM's, but after the election it was explicitly politicised. EPRDF model farmers were required to become party members and had political responsibilities to fulfil in return for the privileged access they had to agricultural inputs (Lefort, 2010, 2012; Chinigò, 2022: 96-114).

Officials could not control selection of model farmers as easily as selection of trainees. I found some accounts where officials had attempted to nominate individuals to be MfM model farmers, although these were rare. For example, when I asked one former model farmer if he had been selected by MfM staff, he told me, 'No, the community selected my name and passed it to MfM.'[106] Any process of 'community' selection was likely to have been significantly influenced by *kebele* officials. A second model farmer suggested that there was no difference between being an MfM model farmer and a government one. When asked if he was a model farmer for MfM or the government, he replied 'It's all the same'.[107] This again implies that in some cases at least, the regime may have selected model farmers and encouraged MfM to work with these.

However, these accounts were in the minority. More often, I found that people distinguished between being an MfM model farmer and one for the government. One

[106] Interview, former model farmer and former employee on demonstration site, 16 November 2019.

[107] Interview, two former model farmers, 17 November 2019.

former MfM model farmer I spoke to insisted that he did not have any political responsibilities. 'I was never involved in any kind of [political] responsibility,' he said; 'When the *kebele* called me I never went'.[108] This person was not alone in drawing a stark distinction between being an MfM and a government model farmer. Another former model farmer who had also been a *kebele* administrator, said: 'There were no government model farmers then, only MfM model farmers. Now there are government model farmers, but no incentive. Incentives were much better under MfM- [the difference is] like between sky and earth.'[109]

As these accounts imply, the selection process for model farmers was not fully controlled by the regime. There were several interconnected reasons for this. Firstly, the pool of people from whom model farmers could be selected was small. MfM wanted to select those farmers whose land looked impressive and could serve as an example to others. This meant farmers who were relatively better off, with good looking land. One model farmer, when asked why he was selected, said 'of all the surrounding farmers I was the best […] the amount of harvest I collected was more'.[110] A former MfM development agent emphasised that model farmers were those whose agricultural practices were already exemplary – they should be 'models' already before they were selected.[111] This also implied farmers who were relatively wealthy compared to their neighbours. In the 1990s, better off farmers were out of favour with the new EPRDF

[108] Interview, former model farmer, 12 November 2019.

[109] Interview, *kebele* official, formerly chairperson of *kebele* development committee, 2 May 2019

[110] Interview, former model farmer, 12 November 2019.

[111] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 7 November 2019.

regime. It had specifically targeted former Derg cadres, dubbed the *birokrasi*, and so-called 'feudal remnants' (former members of the aristocracy) under the Amhara land redistribution of 1997, and sought to dispossess them of their land (Ege, 1997). Yet it was often these people that MfM sought to work with. By the time EPRDF attempted to bring this group of people into party structures after 2005, many of them had already been MfM model farmers for a decade, and were therefore less likely to be open to regime overtures as they already had support from MfM.

Secondly, unlike training, selection of model farmers was not simply about creating a list and passing it to MfM. Being a model farmer involved responsibilities as well as benefits – which many farmers struggled to fulfil. They had to make time to attend meetings with MfM staff and follow their advice. They had to tend to animals and plants which demanded new, often labour-intensive forms of care: new plant varieties demanded more water and new animal varieties required much more food, sometimes of a different kind which was not easily available locally. As one former MfM DA put it, 'the selection criteria was also dependent on his active participation for the activity'.[112] Therefore, there was a tendency towards self-selection among model farmers over time. Being a MfM model farmer appealed mainly to farmers who could afford to take the risks in the hope of greater rewards in future.

When I asked people who were not involved with the project why they had not got involved, they often said this was because they didn't have time; they were busy on the

[112] Interview, MfM member of staff, 3 May 2019.

fields[113] or looking after children.[114] They were also unwilling to take risks: using valuable land for trees which would only conserve soil and could not produce a crop for eating or for sale was something that many farmers resisted.[115] One woman told me that there was talk at the time that what MfM staff are doing would bring problems, and that those who participated were told they were foolish to take risks.[116] It was not enough, then, for the *kebele* to recommend names, as over the long term only those who managed to follow MfM advice could maintain their status as model farmers. As one said, 'Of all people they preferred my family and me because I did what they [MfM] told me'.[117]

A third reason for the lack of regime control of the selection of model farmers was the direct involvement of Karlheinz Böhm himself. On his visits to Merhabete he personally selected certain people as model farmers. One farmer worked as a security guard on an agricultural demonstration site but through meeting Böhm developed a sort of personal friendship.[118] Böhm would regularly call on him on his visits to Merhabete and even once brought him to Addis Ababa. In the archives there is a record of a MfM meeting in the 1990s, following one particular visit by Böhm, in which it was decided to give a new cow to this person.[119] In an interview, I also heard about how a few women had attended a meeting between Böhm and farmers in a particular *kebele*. He was surprised to find

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[113] Interview, farmer, 8 January 2020.

[114] Interview, farmer, 24 November 2019.

[115] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 7 November 2019.

[116] Informal conversation, 8 January 2020.

[117] Interview, former model farmer, 9 January 2020.

[118] Interview, former model farmer, 26 September 2019.

[119] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – Merhabete File No 2B, From 1994 to Dec 1996. Minutes of the Regular Management Meeting of MIRDP, 22 September 1995.

women in the meeting, saying he had not seen women in any of his meetings before. After having talked to them, he instructed MfM staff to find a piece of land where single women without husbands could work and grow crops.[120] These examples were relatively rare, but Böhm's personal interventions contributed to the regime's inability to control processes of model farmer selection.

In summary, the regime had much less control over distribution of agricultural inputs than it did over training. Whilst officials nominated some people to MfM as model farmers, overall they maintained little control of the process due to the long and arduous process of maintaining status as a model farmer. Some people nominated by the regime may have failed to impress MfM staff and been quietly dropped as model farmers. Officials likely struggled to devote the amount of time necessary to monitor and oversee all the work done by MfM DAs in visiting model farmers and checking on their progress. Ultimately, the labour-intensive nature of the selection process meant that it was hard for officials to control. Whilst the regime took on the concept of model farmer itself nationally, adding a political dimension after 2005, in Merhabete, the MIRDP's agricultural inputs were largely ineffective as a vehicle for regime strategies for coercive distribution. In fact, they were generally distributed to better off farmers who were unlikely to have been regime allies. This had long-term consequences which are reviewed later in this chapter.

[120] Informal conversation, two former members of MfM women's group, 29 November 2019.

'Social support' including emergency assistance

Emergency assistance was another resource which, nationally, was an important element of regime coercive distribution strategies. The MIRDP maintained a budget for what it called 'social support' – which included both emergency assistance and some longer-term support. At approximately 100,000 Birr (~€10,000) per year, social support represented 0.8% of the total budget in 2003-04 and 0.3% in 2005-07. Nonetheless this was significant for the people who received it, as it was direct support in the form of cash, clothing or supplies to particular individuals.

Annual reports divide social support into 'one off' assistance, and some 20-25 'Permanently Sponsored Students'. One off support was often offered after particular calamities. I met one woman who had been in a bus which went over the edge of a cliff. She had to spend 8 months recovering in a hospital in Addis Ababa, and during this time MfM provided for her children, giving them food and clothing until she returned and could take them back. Support for 'Permanently Sponsored Students' was intended for one of two types of student. The first was for those who had such difficult backgrounds that they could not attend school without support – for example, I met one young man who had been electrocuted while climbing on a transformer and who had difficulties writing afterwards and was supported by MfM. The other type was 'poor but high achieving' students – children also from disadvantaged backgrounds but who showed particular academic abilities which MfM wanted to encourage. These students were given some supplies whilst in school and in some cases their further study was supported by MfM up to university level.

According to interviews, selection of social support beneficiaries was done largely by MfM staff. In some cases, there were links between beneficiaries and staff; for example, one ‘poor but high achieving’ student was a relative of an MfM security guard. Another beneficiary of one-off support was a neighbour of an MfM member of staff. In one case which was likely exceptional, a young man who had not been a recipient of social support but had been a high achiever at school, and had been noticed by an MfM member of staff, described to me what happened when he got his final exam mark. It was not good enough to get him into university, but he thought that he could still study through taking an extension programme with weekend study in Addis Ababa. He suggested to the MfM staff member that if MfM could employ his father as a security guard, the salary would cover the cost of this additional education. The friend in MfM agreed and the father was taken on as a security guard. This is an example of the significant influence that MfM staff had over social support.

In contrast to the influence of MfM staff over selection of social support beneficiaries, I encountered no reference to *kebele* or *wereda* officials exerting influence over this in interviews. This does not necessarily mean that they had no influence at all. For example, teachers from the school could play a role in identifying students who were promising. It is also possible that *kebele* officials may in some cases have written supportive letters testifying to people’s backgrounds, similar to the woman who was selected for sewing training above. But overall, it appears the influence of officials over this resource was limited, whereas the influence of MfM staff was much greater. I now turn to the recruitment of these staff, and the influence the regime had over this process.

Salaries and wages

As with model farmers, the group of former staff was an influential group at the time I visited Merhabete. Former staff were some of the people who were most likely to propagate narratives about how MfM was superior to the regime. This section provides an introduction to MfM's recruitment practices and reviews the extent to which the regime exerted any influence over this during implementation. Later on in the chapter I review the long-term consequences for regime political dominance of the existence of an influential group of people who had a livelihood independent from the regime.

MfM was a major employer in the *wereda*. Annual reports show that in 2003-04 the project provided permanent employment to 114 people, reducing to 107 in 2006 and 89 in 2007 as the project phased out. On top of these numbers there were many casual workers. Financial reports show budget lines for security guards and others for example in seedling stations, the livestock centre and at staff offices and residences. In total, between 1.3 million and 1.9 million Birr (~€130,000- 190,000) per year was spent on itemised salary and wage costs between 2003 and 2007, which constituted around 7% of the project's total budget. If staff allowances, medical expenses and compensation are also included the percentage of the total rises to 8%. Whilst this may not sound like a significant amount when compared with the budget for construction, for example, it was 5 times the amount spent on training and workshops during the same period.[121]

[121] Author's own calculations based on tables in 'Menschen für Menschen, Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project, Terminal Report for the Year 2003-04, November 2004' and 'Menschen für Menschen, Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project, Terminal Report for the Project Period 2005-2007, March 2008'.

In addition to these itemised salary and wage costs, many more people were involved in daily labour on construction work. In the later years of the project these were employed through external contractors, although in the early phases some were hired directly by MfM. Some unpaid 'community labour' was also used for construction projects, especially water points, although I was told that it was often difficult to find people who would provide this labour for free and a daily wage was frequently paid.[122] No figures on the total number of people employed through daily labour on MIRDP construction projects were available, but the given sheer number of facilities built, this likely numbered into the thousands.

The majority of MfM employees in the district were from Merhabete. The number of expatriate staff varied from zero to two at the most. Some staff were brought in from other areas of Ethiopia, including the project director and most senior staff. But other than these, the rest of the staff were employed locally. For people from elsewhere, Merhabete was not an attractive place to work as it was rural and relatively far from larger towns; there are records in the archives of drivers being posted to the project, but because of 'social hardship' this posting was limited to a year with drivers to be rotated each year.[123] Whereas some skilled construction workers (such as carpenters and masons) were brought in from elsewhere, local people were also trained up to take on these roles. Salaries and wages therefore represented a major resource in the *wereda*.

Officials generally appeared to have little control over MfM hiring practices. I encountered a few anecdotes where officials recommended staff for employment with

[122] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 April 2019.

[123] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – Merhabete File No 2B, From 1994 to Dec 1996. Letter from Project Administrator to all Mercedes Truck Trailer Drivers and Co-Drivers, 17 October 1995.

MfM or appeared to have had an influence over recruitment practices, but these were rare. For example, I met a former MfM security guard in one of the *kebeles* who said he had been recommended to MfM by *kebele* officials, as he was a party member.[124] Another man who had been an MfM employee mentioned that he had been recommended by his school to MfM and secured a role that way. One man who had been the chair of a *kebele* development committee, an official role, talked about how there was significant demand for jobs building a demonstration site for new plant varieties. As the chairperson, he said, in order to be fair, every 40 days new employees would be hired so that all the community would be involved.

These anecdotes suggest that officials attempted to exercise control over employment with MfM on some occasions. However, these were the exception rather than the rule. Other former members of staff talked about how they had sent letters to MfM when they were aware of opportunities, or were interviewed for particular positions with a lot of competition, suggesting that the regime was not able to influence recruitment in these cases. I also heard stories of members of staff recommending their friends or family for jobs with MfM, some of whom were successful.[125] One security guard who had not worked for MfM complained that he would have liked to work for them but 'in order to work there you need to have some relative.'[126]

Additionally, regarding manual labour for construction projects, despite the anecdote above, there was not always competition for jobs as the work was hard and not attractive

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[124] Interview, two former MfM security guards, 1 May 2019.

[125] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 28 May 2019; Interview, former MfM member of staff, 25 February 2020.

[126] Interview, security guard, 3 May 2019.

to all. Some people who had worked as security guards for MfM told me that daily labour on irrigation schemes was not popular, due to the hot weather in the lowland and the long distance to walk.[127] Another person who had worked as a manual labourer on MfM projects said that his parents were not well connected so they had not been able to get any training or support as farmers – but he was able to find manual labour work as 'the only thing that's needed is the labour, not the social status.' He also noted that many dropped out or were fired: 'the people who were involved would be those who would start but also finish their work.'[128] In this way, regime influence over recruitment was limited. Even though officials made some efforts to influence MfM recruitment practices in a few cases, the sheer number of roles, the competition and labour shortage for others meant that the regime ultimately had little control over who had access to employment opportunities.

Salaries and wages were therefore not well integrated into regime strategies for coercive distribution. In fact, the MIRDP employed many people who were out of favour with the regime, including those who had previously worked for the Derg. I met several people who had worked as soldiers or party cadres, who had fallen on hard times after the change of government, but had then been rehabilitated by working with MfM. A number of former Derg soldiers were hired by MfM as security guards.[129] One woman proudly recalled that she had been responsible for managing and organising 11,500 people under the Derg. After 1991 she lost her job and had to sell textiles and work in a

[127] Interview, two former MfM security guards, 1 May 2019.

[128] Interview, mason, 26 November 2019.

[129] Focus Group Discussion, security guards and cleaners, 3 May 2019.

small restaurant. She said she was on the point of leaving the country to work in the Middle East, had got her passport and was organising paperwork in Addis Ababa when she heard that MfM had started work in Merhabete, her home district. She went back and approached the MfM office in Alem Ketema for a role as a social worker. MfM said they needed people with organisational skills like hers. 'Because I was a Derg cadre', she said, 'I got the highest score in the interview'.[130] Here a background with the Derg was no barrier to employment – in fact this interviewee saw it as a positive asset.

Another woman, who had had a senior position in local government in Merhabete under the Derg, reported losing everything after the change of government. 'When ERPDF came some people gave information on what I did. All my position and status became zero,' she said. A short while later, she started work on the project, initially in a very menial role fetching water, but later taking on a role to organise other labourers and finally became the secretary of one of the MfM savings and credit schemes.[131]

These anecdotes show how the regime not only failed to capture staff salaries and wages and integrate them into regime patronage networks, but that MfM employment practices specifically rehabilitated those whom the regime had ostracised, and gave people livelihoods who were not well predisposed towards EPRDF. Generally, with some limited exceptions, MfM had autonomy over its hiring practices in Merhabete and this meant that the resource stream was largely outside regime control.

[130] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 28 May 2019.

[131] Interview, former member of savings and credit association, 20 September 2019.

The above discussion has shown that many resource streams of the MIRDP were not controlled by the regime. Officials did succeed in exerting considerable influence over training, which likely became incorporated at least to some extent into regime strategies of coercive distribution. Regime reach was also bolstered by the provision of furniture and equipment for schools and the hospital. However, many important resource streams including agricultural inputs, emergency assistance and staff salaries remained largely out of officials' control. This posed a potential threat to regime political dominance, because many individuals who were not well predisposed towards EPRDF – especially those who had held important local positions under the Derg regime – managed to access MIRDP resource streams including as model farmers and staff.

This raises the question of why officials were able to control certain resource streams and not others: why they could control training, for example, but not agricultural inputs. The answer lies partly in the scale of MfM resources in the district and partly in the methods of distribution involved, which were difficult to supervise and control. MfM distributed so many resources in Merhabete that it was not possible for officials to supervise all resources closely. As seen earlier, the total budget of the MIRDP was likely considerably larger than the *wereda* budget. Officials therefore concentrated their attention on construction of schools and other built structures, as set out in the previous chapter, as this was a high priority for the regime; and they also focused on training, because this was relatively easy to control given limited staff time. By contrast, selection of model farmers was much harder for officials to control, due to the labour-intensive process involved in maintaining a status as a model farmer. Officials did not have the time to supervise and control this process. They also did not control MfM recruitment practices,

perhaps because they simply did not have the mandate to exert control over this; the literature on NGOs in Ethiopia at this time does not suggest that the regime was heavily involved in recruitment practices.

Whether officials, during implementation, perceived any political risks arising from MfM's resource distribution practices remains uncertain. As has been suggested already, however, the fact that the regime did not fully control the project's resource distribution did lead to problems for the regime in the years afterwards. The remainder of this chapter considers the longer-term consequences for the regime of the MIRDP's resource distribution practices.

The long-term consequences of project resource distribution practices

After projects close, resource flows themselves dry up. At first glance, it might seem that any political consequences of the MIRDP's resource distribution practices would be limited to the time of its implementation. It is true that a decade after the project had ended, the legacy of its resource transfers was less visible than that of its built structures. However, this legacy was no less real. I met many residents of Merhabete who had previously accessed resources through the project. Ten years after closure, these had had significant effects on regime political dominance. Some people had used resources received under the project to change their lives significantly, for example moving to the *wereda* town, Alem Ketema, building houses and finding new jobs as shop owners or grain traders. These people were often critical of the regime and did not have to fear punishment by being left off government distribution lists, as they were financially

independent. They were therefore less susceptible to regime strategies of using resources as incentives.

Not all those who had received resources through the project had changed their lives significantly. Some former model farmers and former recipients of social support led lives which were not dramatically different to those they had lived during implementation, but they recalled with a great sense of gratitude the support they had received from MfM. They felt a sense of loyalty to Karlheinz Böhm in particular. This gave them a more sceptical attitude to regime legitimating narratives, as they rather saw MfM and Böhm as the origin of development, and not the regime.

In what follows below I explore the long-term consequences of the project's resource transfers for two groups: former MfM staff and model farmers. These are presented as two prominent groups in the district whose livelihoods were significantly shaped by the MIRDP. However, these were not the only people whose material circumstances and outlooks were shaped by the project. In the conclusion I also briefly refer to other groups which had received resources through the project and outline the implications of these resource transfers for regime political dominance.

Former MfM staff

It was not difficult to find former MfM staff after my arrival in Merhabete. Many were living in Alem Ketema and were very happy to talk to me about their experiences with the project. While some former staff had moved to work on MfM projects in other parts of the country, especially those who were not originally from Merhabete, many former staff with links in the area had chosen to stay on, switching to alternative jobs such as running

shops, hotels or bars. These were some of the better off people of the town and were influential locally. In fact, the success of many former MfM staff was the source of a certain amount of resentment. Some people I spoke to in rural areas complained that the project had mainly benefited its own employees: for example a farmer and former member of a water committee said 'They built houses for themselves, Alem Ketema is built by Menschen staff.'[132]

Within the relatively large number of people who had previously been employed by the project, there were some distinct groups. One important group consisted of people who had had mid-level and some more senior roles in the project, for example as development agents, social workers, construction supervisors, technical experts in water or health, or department heads. Almost all of these people had some form of tertiary education, such as a degree or diploma. This made them relatively unusual in a rural town such as Alem Ketema. In the absence of development projects, people from rural areas or from towns the size of Alem Ketema who completed a course of tertiary education and were looking for employment in the 1990s or early 2000s generally had few options to stay in their regions of origin. Their choices were either to move to a larger town or city where there were more job opportunities, or to apply work for the government (which would often anyway post them somewhere other than their home town).

I met several people from Merhabete who started working for the government in various parts of the country, but when they heard about the MIRDP they decided to return to their home district and apply to work for the project.[133] One former member of staff who

[132] Interview, farmer and former member of water committee, 29 November 2019.

[133] Interviews, former MfM members of staff, 25 November 2019 and 6 February 2020.

came from the neighbouring *wereda* explained how MfM had helped him to get out of a farming community. His intention was originally 'to sit in government position. To get chair, to get good salary' but MfM had tempted him to join the agriculture department of MIRDP.[134] MfM's employment practices had therefore created a group of people living in Alem Ketema who had university education but who were not working for the government.

Many, though not all, former staff were critical of the regime. As seen in the previous chapter, these were the people who were most vocally arguing that 'we don't have any government here in Merhabete'[135] or 'You could say we didn't have a government; our government was MfM.' [136] In one account I was told that MfM staff had been involved in campaigning for the opposition during the 2005 elections. This was a sensitive topic and few people were willing to talk about it, but one former MfM member of staff recalled:

> After the 2005 election, the government at that time started to resent it [MfM] because it [the government] thinks that it [MfM] was changing people's political views and their minds… It's after that the relationship started to get ruined. They became suspicious of it because they thought that it was messing with their politics… The workers were very aware and they came from different places like Addis Ababa and there were also *Gurages* [a non-Amhara ethnic group in Ethiopia]… very aware and conscious. And they would motivate people clearly, they weren't scared… They'd motivate people

[134] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 18 April 2019.

[135] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 April 2019.

[136] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 November 2019.

to elect *k'inijit* [CUD, the opposition during the election], and not to elect the current government.[137]

This was the only account I heard of MfM staff campaigning for the opposition in the elections, so it is hard to be fully confident about it, but on balance, it appears credible. I heard from other former staff that EPRDF had lost the election locally. I would expect that while many MfM staff may have avoided campaigning for either side during the election, it is quite possible that some did support the opposition in a private capacity. This person argued it was people from outside Merhabete who were mainly campaigning for the opposition, but whatever the truth of this, there seems to have been a longer-term animosity that sprang up between officials and former MfM staff around this time which persisted until my own visits to the *wereda*. In multiple accounts I heard that relations between the regime and MfM soured in the last few years of the project. For example, I found an internal letter in the *wereda* archives from the agriculture and rural development office to the administration office dated just after the elections, which complained bitterly about MfM, saying it 'has come not to provide enough response to our offices' this had 'come to have a big impact on us, whether our work or our morale'.[138] Several people told me that the *wereda* government had actively pushed MfM to leave.

Another group of former staff consisted of those who had had lower-level roles for the project, for example former security guards and cleaners. Some security guards told me

[137] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 November 2019.

[138] Merhabete Wereda Archives. Box File M9 – 'NGOs'. Letter from *wereda* agriculture and rural development office to the *wereda* administration office, subject: 'Observations on the MfM Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project', dated 30/9/97 E.C. (7 June 2005).

they had been soldiers for the Derg before getting employment with MfM. I heard bitter complaints from this group about how they felt abandoned after MfM left. Many were struggling to find employment in the *wereda*, and specifically said they had not been able to find employment with the government. They said they felt officials did not trust them.[139] One former member of staff explained this as linked to the fact that they would need to join the party to get employment with the government (implying that these former MfM staff were unwilling or unable to do this).[140] Former security guards and cleaners were not especially critical of the regime, and rather blamed MfM for having left the area without, as they saw it, providing for their long-term welfare.

During implementation, both mid-level and more junior staff on the project had livelihoods independent of the regime. This meant that they could criticise the regime without fear of reprisals. After the end of the project, those mid-level and senior staff who stayed in the *wereda* managed to switch to livelihoods which maintained a similar lifestyle, for example as bar or shop owners. Their continuing financial independence meant that they could continue to speak critically of the regime without worrying that they would miss out on regime handouts. The regime may have attempted to ostracise them, but this had little effect. More junior staff, however, suffered as a result of their former employment. Officials saw them as a political threat like their more senior counterparts, and denied them access to government jobs. This clearly was devastating to many of these individuals, and underlined the importance of more senior former staff's financial independence as a safeguard for their political independence.

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[139] Focus Group Discussion, security guards and cleaners, 3 May 2019.

[140] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 November 2019.

Several years of MIRDP salaries and wages had a significant effect on local social structure. The project created a group of people with tertiary education in the *wereda* who, in the absence of the project, would likely have lived elsewhere. Many had backgrounds working with the Derg and were not predisposed to be positive towards EPRDF. They had livelihoods independent of the regime and were unafraid to criticise it, including because officials' threats to remove them from lists of beneficiaries of state programmes would have had little effect on them. Their level of education also made them influential in the district. This made a significant difference to regime political dominance in Merhabete, because it increased the willingness of influential people in the district to criticise the regime.

Former model farmers

Like staff, MfM model farmers also represented a group which had received significant resources through the MIRDP. As noted above, model farmers were generally those who were better-off locally, those who had good land and spare time – many of whom had been those who the EPRDF regime had castigated as *birokrasi* or 'feudal remnants' shortly after it came to power. Like former staff, they were therefore not predisposed to have a positive opinion of EPRDF.

Model farmers improved their fortunes through support from MfM and their own hard work, and not through connections with *kebele* officials. Ten years after the project closed, while some people had fallen on hard times, others had managed to change their lives. Many recalled how they had been given seedlings which were now trees, or that their current herd of cattle was descended from cows given to them by MfM 20 years

previously.[141] Some had made more significant changes. For example, one former model farmer who had had success implementing MfM advice used a loan from the project to buy a share in a grain mill; he later moved into a wood and metalwork business. A son of another model farmer also managed to move out of farming; at the time I visited Merhabete he was a successful grain trader. Both these individuals had built comfortable modern houses in Alem Ketema.

Some model farmers were prepared to criticise the regime, although generally not to the extent of former senior or mid-level staff. One model farmer who had developed new a livelihood in Alem Ketema was the one quoted in the previous chapter stating that 'the constitution of Ethiopia clearly states the government is responsible to build infrastructure, but in the case of Merhabete it was Karl. Karl did what the government was supposed to do.' He also told me that people wanted to elect Karl during the elections.[142] Former model farmers who had stayed in rural *kebeles* were generally not as critical of the regime, but even here, I found some who were proud about the fact that they had not been involved in political responsibilities for the government. One told me 'From Derg to EPRDF I didn't want to be involved… even though they tried to force me to get involved I didn't want to.' He also expressed regret that the veterinary services which had been available under MfM were no longer provided by the government.[143] More generally, many model farmers I spoke to were very effusive about Karlheinz Böhm, his generosity and dedication. They still felt they owed a lot to his support over the years of project implementation.

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[141] Interviews: former model farmer, 12 November 2019; former member of women's project, 29 November 2019.

[142] Interview, business owner and former model farmer, 14 November 2019.

[143] Interview, former model farmer, 12 November 2019.

Like former staff, MfM model farmers were a group of people who had built up resources independent of regime patronage networks. Some managed to transform this into longer-term livelihoods which were still sustaining them a decade after the project closed. Those who managed to change their lives significantly through the project and move to Alem Ketema were most likely to be critical of the regime. The fact that they did not depend on the regime for any kind of resource distribution enabled them to express discontent with EPRDF rule where others were more afraid to speak out. Those who were still farming in rural *kebeles* ten years on were less likely to criticise officials explicitly, but still felt they owed loyalty to MfM and Böhm. Like staff, former model farmers were influential people in their areas. Their loyalty to MfM and, in some cases, willingness to criticise the regime had an impact on political discourse in the district. This underlines the significant effects MfM's resource transfers in the district had on regime political discourse.

Conclusion

In much of the literature on Ethiopian politics, EPRDF is understood as dominating donor projects, ensuring that their resource flows are integrated into regime patronage networks. With this in mind, I expected a project like MIRDP – run by an organisation which aligned itself very closely to the regime and which cooperated extensively with it – to be especially likely to strengthen regime political dominance. More than other projects, I thought that its resource streams would be captured by officials, directed towards regime allies and kept away from regime enemies. By contrast, I found that the regime not only had limited control over the project's resources during implementation, but in the longer

term suffered a significant blow to its strategies of political dominance through the emergence of a kind of alternative local elite in the *wereda* which owed its loyalty to Karlheinz Böhm rather than the regime.

The chapter first analysed different categories of expenditure and demonstrated that allocation of resources was not overseen or controlled by the regime in many cases. While the regime had significant influence over training, as well as furniture and equipment, it did not achieve control over agricultural inputs or staff salaries. Officials were not able to control distribution of agricultural inputs because of the labour-intensive process involved in selecting and supporting model farmers. While officials may have nominated individuals to be model farmers, not all would have been able to continue with the tough programme of meetings and new practices required by MfM. Regarding recruitment of staff and casual workers, it seems with some minor exceptions that MfM was largely allowed to recruit who it wanted locally without much interference from the regime. There are also few accounts in the wider literature of the EPRDF regime becoming involved in recruitment practices of international NGOs, which may have been seen as outside the bounds of government intervention at the time.

In the second part of the chapter, I reviewed the long-term consequences of these resource distribution practices. The project had distributed resources to important groups of people who, ten years later, saw MfM and Karlheinz Böhm as the origins of their present success, and not the regime. Former MfM staff were a relatively well off and influential group who had built houses in Alem Ketema. They were not dependent on the regime for their livelihood, and many were highly critical of EPRDF. Former model farmers also owed much of their livelihood to MfM, while some had managed to achieve financial

independence from the regime. Most of these were effusive about Böhm and praised his works in interviews.

These were some of the most prominent people suggesting that *mengist* had failed in its responsibilities and that MfM showed what *mengist* should have done. However they were not alone. Others who had received support under the project, such as members of women's agricultural groups, or former recipients of social support, were also highly effusive about Böhm and many were also critical of the regime. One recipient of social support was the one quoted as saying that 'the Ethiopian government has done nothing for me, but Karl on the other hand has raised my children.'[144] Elders were another example; while few were singled out for support, some received training and others had an influence over trainee selection. One that I spoke to was critical of many officials, and argued that Merhabete did not have to thank the regime for having brought MfM to the area ('Is it the *wereda* that brought him [Böhm] here? No!... They couldn't, they were doing all kinds of useless things with the police').[145] These people had experienced resources which did not come from the regime, often felt a personal sense of gratitude towards MfM, and became sceptical towards regime claims to be the source of development.

Former staff, model farmers, and others who had received resources from the project were influential people locally. Whilst staff were some of the most critical of the regime, even people who had not been involved in the project at all repeated some of the tropes about MfM and Böhm's benevolence, and the regime's neglect. This included police officers and even some serving government officials, cited in the previous chapter. These

[144] Interview, former recipient of social support, 30 November 2019.

[145] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

people had not benefited personally but likely picked up these narratives from friends or relatives who were more closely involved in the project.

This chapter has provided part of the answer to the puzzle identified in the previous chapter: why did a project which was so closely aligned the EPRDF regime undermine regime political dominance – and specifically, why did people not credit the regime for bringing MfM to the area? The element of the answer identified in this chapter was that the project provided resources to individuals and groups outside of the regime's own patronage networks. Some of these were people who were already disposed to be critical towards the regime. Others, through receiving resources through the project, came to see MfM and Böhm as a more credible source of development than the regime. Some developed such financial independence from the regime through the project that they were able to criticise it without fear of being excluded from its own schemes for resource distribution.

It is notable that, just as the regime concentrated its efforts to control resources mainly on built structures and distribution of allowances, neglecting the important role of staff salaries, so the existing literature on aid and authoritarianism focuses more on the visible outputs of development projects and the money they provide, omitting the effects of the aid business on local social structure and the domestic balance of power. The role of NGO and donor staff in domestic politics in aid recipient countries is an important and under-researched field.

Whilst this chapter has provided part of the answer to the question of why people in Merhabete did not credit the regime for bringing MfM to the area, there is another important element to the answer. This is linked to the way MfM staff, including Karlheinz

Böhm himself, interacted with people in the district. In addition to building structures and distributing resources, the MIRDP also had an impact on regime political dominance through the way staff attempted to legitimate their work in Merhabete, and it is to this that the thesis now turns.

Chapter 7: MIRDP's legitimation practices and their political legacy

The MIRDP built many structures and distributed many resources in Merhabete, but just as important as either of these were its non-material practices. This chapter focuses on how MfM staff, including Karlheinz Böhm, interacted with people in the district to legitimate their work in the area – that is, to gain social acceptance – and in turn, how this impacted on regime political dominance.

As set out in chapter 3, I expected that the MIRDP would increase regime political dominance through its legitimation practices – just as I had expected that the MIRDP's built structures and resource distribution practices would have the same effect. MfM appeared to align itself closely with the regime, both nationally and locally in Merhabete. Böhm spoke publicly about the need for MfM to orient itself to government needs and priorities. Delivering development was a core legitimating narrative of EPRDF and MfM seemed likely to support this. The construction of large amounts of infrastructure for the government indicated that MfM saw itself as supporting the government vision for development rather than developing its own. Overall, this suggested that the MIRDP would be likely to reinforce the EPRDF regime's legitimating narratives, and bolster the public impression that it was a good *mengist* which was sending development.

What was striking about the case was that MfM did indeed align its activities, and to a significant extent also its narratives, with the regime, but nonetheless undermined regime political dominance. MfM became seen as an example of what a good *mengist* should do,

and the fact that the regime failed to do this delegitimated it in the eyes of many residents. This chapter explores the role that MfM's legitimation practices played in creating this effect.

The chapter begins by setting out some of the challenges to its legitimacy that MfM faced on starting work in the *wereda*. I then move on to review how MfM used two key legitimation practices identified in chapter 3: strategic alignment and developmentalist narratives. Regarding the first, I show that MfM did generally practice strategic alignment. Its staff collaborated closely with officials at local level and regularly appeared in public together with them. There was not always full alignment between the regime and MfM, with certain periods where relations were visibly tense. But in general, MfM avoided public conflict with officials and presented an impression of close collaboration and partnership. Compared to many other development NGOs, MfM's alignment with the regime was strong.

Regarding developmentalist narratives, again MfM and the regime often used similar language, for example around 'awareness' or 'consciousness', which situated residents of Merhabete as 'backward' and in need of education from outsiders, including both the regime and MfM. But a closer analysis of MfM's use of development language reveals that often it positioned the NGO and the regime as distinct. Like many NGO employees, MfM staff complained that the government was failing to follow up and implement development initiatives started by the NGO. They also complained about the government's political activities, contrasting these with MfM's approach to development which 'non-political'. These resonated with people locally and their combined effect was to position MfM as a higher or better source of development than the regime. Importantly,

these narratives resonated locally. Many people referred to MfM rather than the government as the source of ‘awareness’ and modern attitudes, which delegitimated the regime in its attempt to use development as a core legitimating narrative.

Through my visits to Merhabete, I found that strategic alignment and developmentalist narratives were not the only ways that MfM sought to legitimate its work in the district. In the remainder of the chapter, I review two other sets of practices the NGO used to establish its legitimacy. Firstly, Karlheinz Böhm used his own visits to legitimate MfM’s work in the district. These visits cemented a sense of Böhm as a personalised patron – a form of authority which was known and understood locally – but also established his authority as distinct from that of the regime.

Secondly, MfM distributed symbolic benefits to certain groups of people as a legitimation practice. While staff and beneficiaries received resources from MfM, they also were rewarded in non-material ways for their participation, for example through certificates or by receiving visits from prestigious people from Addis Ababa or Germany. These practices made these individuals well known in the district, and again cemented the sense that MfM was a powerful actor with its own ideas and system of rewards.

What both these practices had in common was that, in legitimating MfM, they emphasised the distinction between NGO and regime rather than stressing continuity. This becomes the key conclusion from this chapter and indicates the need to refine the mechanism as set out in the conceptual framework. Rather than focusing on specific legitimating practices of strategic alignment and developmentalist narratives, a more important question is whether projects are constructed as distinct or as contiguous with regimes. I return to this point in chapter 8.

The challenge of legitimating the MIRDP

Many MfM staff I spoke to mentioned how difficult it was at first to do development work in Merhabete. Several commented on the fact that the MIRDP was the first major development project in the area, and that this meant that people were initially suspicious about MfM, its intentions, and the possibility that they might be harmed by the project. From the perspective of MfM staff, they believed they faced a challenge to legitimate the work of the NGO, to convince people that their work in the district was justified.

Some interviewees suggested that at first, people thought that MfM was attempting to change people's religion. This may be connected to the fact that before it operated in the *wereda*, the only other external development organisation that had worked there was the Baptist Mission. This had provided food aid during the 1985 famine[146] and continued to work in Merhabete on a small scale up to the 1990s.[147] Whilst it was carrying out charitable activities, it had links to organisations which sought to spread the Baptist faith in Ethiopia. Some of my interlocutors seemed to be a little confused about the names of the two organisations, due to the similar pronunciation of 'Mission' and 'Menschen'. One senior MfM member of staff said that because of the Baptist Mission, people in Merhabete had been suspicious of MfM and thought it wanted to hurt their faith.[148] A woman who had been involved in one of the savings and credit schemes told me 'the Menschen project

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[146] Menschen für Menschen (MfM), 'Programme Document: Merhabete Integrated Conservation and Development Programme – First 5-Year Phase, December 1987', p. 3. Available online at https://boris-portal.unibe.ch/entities/publication/ce3ffb08-6931-456d-82fd-3e8b9a7d8601/full. Accessed 14 November 2025.

[147] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 April 2019.

[148] Interview, MfM member of staff, 22 February 2019.

faced a problem because the community believed they wanted to convert the people to Protestantism.'[149]

Others suggested that people had thought MfM was Muslim. A former model farmer said 'Well, when they came we were confused and thought that they were Islamic.'[150] An elder who had been closely involved in the project complained, 'Before, the priests used to say this is an organisation of Islam. But later they were asking me to get them in, all the priests.'[151] It is hard to be sure about where this idea came from, but perhaps the notion that MfM might be related to the Baptist mission mutated into a rumour that it was promoting Islam.

I also heard accounts of how people were resistant to the messages of MfM related to family planning, and against early marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). For example, in the archives, there was a record of a meeting about family planning between Karlheinz Böhm and local women in one *kebele*. This document recorded that 'the women of Berkato did not use contraceptives because they were of the opinion this is only for bar-ladies and under the dignity of a decent women! [sic].'[152] In another account, I heard how people had critiqued MfM's approach to contraception by comparing it with the organisation's campaign against FGM. One woman had argued back to Böhm, saying that he had previously said that people in Merhabete were violating nature, but now he

[149] Interview, former member of savings and credit association, 20 September 2019.

[150] Interview, shop owner, 1 December 2019.

[151] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

[152] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – MERH 2005. 'Merhabete Field Visit from May 22-25, 2005'.

was suggesting they should violate nature.[153] This illustrates how some people resisted the MIRDP on the grounds it was offending local religious and cultural sensitivities.

In some cases, I was provided with accounts of specific resistance to the project in its early phases – especially to water points. One former model farmer told me about a plan to develop a spring. Farmers had resisted the plan because they were worried that the land would dry out, and so it was not implemented.[154] An elder gave me another account of resistance to the building of a well. One farmer, who was on the *wereda* council, had crops growing on a field near where a well would be built with support from MfM. After the well had been dug, he filled it with stones. When these were removed, he filled it again with stones together with soil and a thorny plant which would make it harder to remove the stones a second time.[155]

These anecdotes give an illustration of the challenges facing MfM staff as they attempted to engage with local people and carry out project activities in Merhabete in the 1990s and early 2000s. The various ways in which people in the district were wary or suspicious of MfM indicate the importance to its staff of developing a strong justification for the NGO's work – one which would be seen as legitimate by the local population. The rest of this chapter explores the legitimation practices used by MfM staff to justify their work, beginning with strategic alignment.

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[153] Interview, MfM member of staff, 22 February 2019.

[154] Interview, two model farmers, 2 May 2019.

[155] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

Strategic Alignment

As noted in chapter 3, strategic alignment is a common legitimation practice for development agencies. By publicly emphasising their connections with and approval from the government, they can gain social acceptance in particular areas. Strategic alignment is often practised by agencies which provide services, as distinct from those which are advocating changes to government policy, who tend to adopt a more confrontational stance (Dodworth, 2022: 91-117; Toepler et al., 2020). I expected MfM, which adopted very collaborative relations with the government at national level (seen in chapter 4), to practice strategic alignment in Merhabete also.

Broadly speaking, this was what I found. Throughout most of the implementation of the MIRDP, staff worked closely with officials and presented an impression of partnership with the regime. For example, as seen in chapter 5, Böhm appeared in public together with Meles on the occasion of the opening of Alem Ketema Enat Hospital, and he attended the official transfers of various other buildings to the regime, including clinics and school blocks. These occasions communicated a sense that MfM and the government were engaged in a joint development project, in which MfM was the junior partner – or as Meles put it, MfM was 'at the forefront of the government's anti-poverty struggle.'[156]

Discussions with former staff showed that this picture of collaboration was also reflected in more day-to-day interactions between MfM staff and officials in the district. A senior member of staff for MfM who had previously been involved in the Merhabete project said with regard to collaboration with the government, 'we moved as one body'. He told

[156] EBC Video Archives, Addis Ababa. LRR12186: 'Enat Hospital in Merhabete', Television Report.

me about *wereda* level technical committees that were set up on agriculture, health, and education which included representatives from MfM and the *wereda*. The structures were headed by the *wereda* administrator. Together they developed solutions to problems and carried out joint visits to *kebeles* every 2 weeks. He reported a sense of harmony and working together.[157]

If anything, the picture at *kebele* level was even more collaborative. One former MfM DA recalled how he had worked with *kebele* officials:

> Surprisingly it was very good… We were living there, they are living with me as neighbour, teachers are also neighbours, Health Extension [worker] was there, and we discuss at night, even after 4pm,[158] we gather and discuss our problem. Then we separate villages and we assigned one of the DA with me, or one of the teachers with me, to organise farmers. Friendly. Even I was instructed by the teacher as a friend, to initiate the communities to send their children for school.[159]

Here there is a strong picture of collaboration. Officials and MfM staff found themselves in a similar situation as educated people stationed in rural areas, away from family and friends. It was natural for them to socialise together. The quote also suggests that MfM DAs and officials helped each other out with their respective duties: a teacher would go

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[157] Interview, MfM member of staff, 22 February 2019.

[158] This is likely meant to refer to 10pm. Although the interview was in English, 10pm is expressed as 4 o'clock in Amharic.

[159] Interview, MfM member of staff, 3 May 2019.

with the MfM DA to 'organise farmers'; in return, he would go with the teacher and encourage people to send their children to school. The impression for local residents would have been that MfM and the government were collaborating very closely; some may indeed have seen MfM and the regime as 'one body'.

In addition to this day-to-day collaboration, MfM also complied with the regime's bureaucratic requirements for registration and reporting, which the literature suggests act to naturalise the authoritarian order (Lorch and Bunk, 2017). The Merhabete *wereda* archives reveal a series of signed agreements between MfM and the *wereda* government which acted to formalise the regime's position of oversight over the project. The archives also show how this oversight was governed by higher levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy. For example, a letter from the Amhara regional food security office in 2004 stated that due to new regulations, *wereda* agriculture offices had the right to sign and approve any NGO project up to 2 million Ethiopian Birr (approx. €200,000), and outlined the reporting requirements.[160] As noted in chapter 5, the MIRDP was also subject to periodic external evaluation by the regional and zonal governments, where more senior officials would visit Merhabete and review the progress of the project.[161] Also as mentioned in chapter 6, the selection of trainees was overseen by *kebele* officials who needed to 'stamp' or 'sign and seal' the final list of those selected. All these bureaucratic practices reinforced the sense that the regime was in a position of authorising the work of MfM in Merhabete.

[160] Merhabete Wereda Archives. Box File M9 – 'NGOs'. Letter from Amhara National Regional State Food Security and Disaster Prevention Office to *wereda* agriculture and rural development offices. Subject: 'Project preparation and approval process', dated 4/12/96 E.C. (11 August 2004).

[161] MfM Addis Ababa archives. 'Menschen für Menschen Integrated Rural Development Project, January 2005 – December 2007, Closing Evaluation Report' (in Amharic). Digital copy received from MfM staff.

The strategic alignment between MfM and the regime was not, however, perfect. As noted in previous chapters, there were periods where relations were tense. One of these periods was the early phase of implementation in the 1990s, when MfM had decided to change its approach and withdrew its support for government DAs, instead recruiting its own (see chapter 6). In the words of one senior member of staff, for a while this led to 'turmoil'.[162] Another elaborated:

> Then the conflict just came. Because those people lost their top up, so new development agents are going to do these activities, so it is with several, several challenges that we started our job of work… So finally, even as rivals, we have been seen as rivals in the same area.[163]

At this point, strategic alignment between the regime and MfM was very limited. During this period, the close collaboration between officials and MfM staff described earlier in this section was likely seldom seen. Catchment areas were divided, with MfM DAs working in some areas and government DAs in others – increasing the sense of rivalry between the two. However, many staff told me that relations were later repaired, and that for most of implementation they were strong.

The other time when strategic alignment was tested was the end of the project. Again as noted in previous chapters, after the 2005 elections, local officials appear to have become more wary of MfM – perhaps because people had rejected their arguments that

[162] Interview, MfM member of staff, 22 February 2019.

[163] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 6 February 2020.

the regime should be credited for MfM's development work in Merhabete. As the former member of staff quoted in the previous chapter recalled, 'It's after that the relationship started to get ruined. They became suspicious of it because they thought that it was messing with their politics.'[164] Notably, this cooling-off in relations seems not only linked to regime figures assessing that MfM was harming their politics but also MfM staff reconsidering whether they had become too close to the government. A note of an internal MfM meeting in Addis Ababa in August 2005, three months after the elections, recorded:

> Due to the political situation tree planting in the reforestation areas was hampered in some areas, in particular in Merhabete. We took this opportunity to discuss quite at length if we were here really following the farmers wish – or rather the politicians, since this reforestation policy is also Government policy… We all agreed that we have to do more groundwork and go through the elders more than just through the Government channels, which exerted quite often pressure in the past.[165]

This indicates that in 2005 at least, MfM staff were entertaining the idea that the relations they had cultivated with the regime had become too close. After 2005, day-to-day relations between MfM and government became less cosy than they had been previously. I was told this in several interviews and some said the regime had actively pushed MfM

[164] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 November 2019.

[165] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – Midda Merha Derra 2003-06. 'Brief Summary and Reflections on the Semi-Annual Meeting 2005', 24 August 2005.

to leave the area. Nonetheless, even at this time, there was no formal break in relations. MfM continued to comply with bureaucratic requirements, and also attended formal events where school blocks and other infrastructural facilities were handed over to the regime.

This section has demonstrated that, throughout most of the period of implementation of the MIRDP, MfM staff maintained a strong strategic alignment with the regime. This alignment varied over time and there were periods when it was weak. However, taken as a whole, MfM generally conformed more to the image of an NGO which aligned itself with government practices, rather than an NGO which constantly challenged government practice and developed an antagonistic relationship with it (as some advocacy NGOs do - see Dodworth, 2022: 91-117). This makes it all the more surprising that ultimately the project weakened regime political dominance in Merhabete. How its legitimation practices came to have this effect will be shown in the rest of this chapter.

Developmentalist narratives

As noted in chapter 3, the language of development can be a core justification for both states and development agencies who seek to intervene in people's lives. Development language distinguishes between bringers and receivers of development, reinforcing the importance of outside expertise which people are seen to lack. The implication is that development is a process which local people cannot do for themselves, and which depends on outside expertise to initiate. Development language is therefore understood as legitimating both development agencies and states as they design and implement

development schemes. However, few accounts in the existing literature specifically investigate whether it legitimates governments, development agencies, or both.

Both in the archives and in my conversations around Merhabete, developmentalist narratives were common. I was almost constantly confronted with claims or more implicit assumptions that the people of Merhabete were, or had been, ignorant, and that they required education through the project. This dated back to the very first project plans. The initial 1987 programme document bemoaned farmers' lack of knowledge of soil conservation techniques, citing their 'resource-abusing agricultural practices' including 'century-old cultivation of slopes and overgrazing of steep hills'.[166]

A 1990 study of women's role in rural development in Merhabete, carried out under the project during the last years of the Derg government, was similarly dismissive about women's lack of knowledge, stating 'Most women in rural areas have neither any idea of birth control and family planning nor any understanding whatsoever of the question of how many children would be desirable from their point of view.'[167] Such language acts to justify the role of outsiders who bring knowledge, including both development agencies and the regime (soil conservation and family planning were also regime priorities dating back to the Derg period).

The archives also provided a striking example of how bringing development implied not only persuasion and education but also, if necessary, force. In the record of a regional

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[166] Menschen für Menschen (MfM), 'Programme Document: Merhabete Integrated Conservation and Development Programme – First 5-Year Phase, December 1987', p. 21 and p. 2. Available online at https://boris-portal.unibe.ch/entities/publication/ce3ffb08-6931-456d-82fd-3e8b9a7d8601/full. Accessed 14 November 2025.

[167] MfM Addis Ababa Archives. Ursula Gämperli and Bokalech Damessa, 'Women in Merhabete: The Role of Women in Rural Development in Merhabete in the two Service Cooperatives of Gideb and Lij Agba (Merhabete Studies Report 2), 1990, p. 42.

meeting between officials of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission and six NGOs implementing projects in Northern Shewa Zone in 1995, a MfM member of staff recorded a conversation on 'community participation':

> All participants have exhaustively discussed on this approach and agreed that unless there is community participation the sustainability and sense of ownership will not be guaranteed… However, there are indirect imposition on limited activities as most farmers are short sighted (appreciate only short-term benefits) due to their level of consciousness. (e.g. Family planning, Afforestation Programme, Soil Conservation etc.)[168]

The language of 'consciousness' here indicates a dichotomy between traditional and modern, and positions the regime and NGOs together on the side of awareness raisers, in opposition to the 'short-sighted' farmers. The account also demonstrates that not only were farmers seen as ignorant (lacking 'consciousness') but also that this ignorance could be used to justify 'indirect imposition', that is, introduction of certain practices against their will such as family planning and soil conservation (the latter likely involving forced 'community labour').

The notion that people from Merhabete were – or at least, had been – ignorant and required education from outsiders was still commonly expressed in conversations I had with people across the district in 2018-20. The terms *ginzabe* ('awareness', or

[168] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Merhabete File No 2B, Report of meeting held at Debre Berhan RRC Zonal Office, 9 October 1995.

'consciousness'), and *ginzabe masich'ebech'a* (awareness raising/ awareness creation) came up frequently in interviews. In repeating this language of awareness or consciousness, MfM staff were attempting to legitimise their work and implicitly also the work of officials in bringing development. They were positioning themselves and government officials on one side of a divide, with ordinary people on the side as those who needed to be developed, to have their awareness raised.

There were many examples of this. One former MfM social worker talked about how she had raised awareness about why early marriage was wrong; on the importance of health check-ups for pregnant women; the importance of giving birth in health centres; and why 'harmful traditional practices' such as FGM should not be practised. She commented, 'they were not even aware of the importance of eating vegetables.'[169] A former MfM DA explained how raising awareness gradually made it easier for the NGO to work in the area: 'Before MfM, there was no intervention of a development project, it was really, no construction, no road, no school, no infrastructures… Then… through training of farmers, road construction and schools building, water supply building and other infrastructure, people became aware.[170]

Importantly, it was not only MfM staff that used the language of awareness. Others across the district had internalised the sense that they were ignorant and required education. For example, one woman who had been involved in an agricultural project under MfM described how she had stopped after they left. When asked why, she said 'It's

[169] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 28 May 2019.

[170] Interview, MfM member of staff, 3 May 2019.

just how we are – we are always going back not forwards.'[171] There was also a notable example of this kind of self-debasing rhetoric in the archives. A group of people from a *wereda* neighbouring Merhabete came to petition Karlheinz Böhm to start a new programme there. The record of the meeting states that the group, which included state officials, Christian and Muslim religious leaders and famers, noted the 'noble works of Karl in the area of health, education, agriculture, Water supply etc.' and asked MfM to support their area 'as their *wereda* is backward and lacking the entire infrastructure in the area of health, education, agriculture etc.'[172] Here again, people situate themselves as 'backward' in comparison with MfM – though this was probably a strategic rhetorical choice. Flattering Böhm as a patron and abasing themselves were likely part of a strategy to attempt to secure resources for the *wereda*.

Generally, these examples positioned both MfM and officials on one side of a social divide, and ordinary local people on the other. However, in this last example of the visit from the neighbouring *wereda*, even local officials (including the head of the *wereda* council) included themselves among those situating themselves as 'backward' in comparison with 'Karl' and his 'noble works'. This is an indication that the development language used in Merhabete did not always position both regime and MfM as joint sources of awareness.

The rest of this section considers ways in which development language used by MfM staff created distinctions between NGO and regime in terms of their approach to

[171] Interview, former member of women's project, 29 November 2019.

[172] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – MERH 2005. 'Note on the Meeting Held by KHB with the representatives of Kalala Woreda of South Wollo', meeting held on 12 Feb 2007.

development. I suggest that this contributed to a sense locally that there was not simply a divide between educated 'interveners' (regime and NGO) and the people, but there were significant differences in the approaches of regime and NGO to development. These in turn allowed a perception to emerge that MfM was a superior or higher source of development than the regime. I specifically review two MfM narratives I encountered in interviews and archival research: firstly, that the government should have been more involved in implementing MfM activities, and secondly, that MfM work was non-political, in contrast to the regime which combined development with politics.

First narrative: lack of government involvement

The notion that governments are not fully committed to development is a relatively common complaint among NGO staff (for examples from another part of Ethiopia see Mulugeta, 2020: 153-9). In line with these narratives, several MfM staff that I spoke to complained that the government was not serious about, or fully bought into, MfM-led development work, or had failed in their duty to continue what MfM had started. As an example, a senior MfM member of staff told me that during the Derg time the government was doing soil conservation work but this was 'not professional'.[173] Another senior former member of staff complained that working with government (now referring to EPRDF) was one of the hardest aspects of the job:

[173] Interview, MfM member of staff, 22 February 2019.

> They [government partners] hardly understand what is going on, you know? Well, relatively, they became positive, but not to the extent that we wanted their support… They should have been the ones who are motivating you towards that, but you are the one who's begging them to do something – which I don't understand and I'm unhappy with that aspect.[174]

In this quote, the speaker complains that the government should have been leading the development process in Merhabete, but in fact it was MfM that was 'begging' the government to do more. Here, MfM is located as the original or senior partner in the development enterprise, rather than the regime.

Another former MfM member of staff who had worked in the MIRDP's agriculture department elaborated at length on the challenges of working with the government. He complained that MfM's 'huge resource' had not achieved its full potential: 'if the government were fully involved and concerned, and using the power or the resource of Menschen für Menschen, Alem Ketema would have been better than what existed.'[175] This was similar to what others told me, but this person went a step further. He linked the supposed lack of awareness of people in the district to the failure of the government to use its coercive powers to force through MfM's development agenda:

> So, you know, your responsibility is to do what the community accept, and usually what the community agreed, as well as, you know, their good mind is

[174] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 17 April 2019.

[175] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 7 November 2019.

> also important. You can't force them… But the government can do, can directly force… You know, we'll do our best, the maximum. But the community will not equally do their best… So you know, here, you can say the farmer is ignorant, but the government is… as a government he must be conscious, he must use the resource, the resource of Menschen für Menschen. To use their resource, he has to teach the farmer. He has to also force… You know, my blame is still to the government, because sometimes this punishment works, especially in our country, you should punish.[176]

Here, a number of different themes of this chapter come together. The speaker acknowledges that legitimating MfM's work in the district was challenging and the importance of securing communities' 'good mind'. He specifically refers to the 'ignorance' of farmers and suggests that they did not put sufficient effort into implementing MfM's advice. But going beyond this, he blames the government for not being sufficiently 'conscious,' specifically because they did not use their coercive powers to enforce MfM advice. In this account, the government is situated as having a power that MfM lacks: coercive power. However, the speaker implies that this power should have been enrolled in ensuring MfM's development ideas were fully implemented. MfM was situated as having greater knowledge and awareness than the regime of what was needed to bring development, and the government's coercive power should have been deployed to back up MfM's knowledge and expertise.

[176] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 7 November 2019.

These narratives were repeated to me in interviews a decade after project closure, so how exactly they were deployed during implementation is not fully clear. Nonetheless it is likely that variants of these narratives were repeated locally at the time. As an example of this, I found the following Amharic note submitted by MfM to the *wereda* government in July 2003 with one of the project's quarterly reports:

> Connected with food aid: when some people were helped with food for work, the people who were not included in food for work have a negative impact on work by stopping their previous participation… The people are not held responsible whether they participate or not – that is, at every level the bodies which are there, in mobilising the population, do not take action against those who do not participate in development.[177]

This is a note from MfM complaining to the local government that it was not helping MfM's development efforts sufficiently in the district, as it did not encourage people to work for free. Some people received food in return for their work, and when this happened others understandably refused to work if they did not get food. MfM wanted the government to 'take action' against 'those who do not participate in development', in other words, those who refuse to provide free labour. The same note also complained that the government was failing to take adequate action against people who removed resources

[177] Merhabete *wereda* archives. Box File 'M24 - Coordination of Aid': Note entitled 'Problems Faced', submitted by the MIRDP to the Merhabete *wereda* government, together with the MIRDP second Quarterly Report of 2003, dated 8/11/1995 E.C. (15 July 2003).

of the project such as gabion wires and canal cover slabs, and used them for their own private purposes. The tone of the message conveys the sense that at this point, MfM felt it was able to criticise the government for failing to play its part in implementing MfM-directed development work. Overall, these narratives positioned MfM as the senior partner in the business of raising awareness and bringing development, whilst the regime was criticised for its lack of knowledge and consciousness compared with MfM. This likely contributed to local perceptions that MfM was the principal or original source of development, rather than the regime.

Second narrative: MfM as non-political

The second aspect in which MfM's development language distinguished between itself and the regime was in its self-characterisation as non-political. This was central to the NGO's sense of its own identity. The very first sentence in the introduction of all annual reports of the MIRDP read: 'Menschen für Menschen is non-religious, non-political and non-governmental organization (NGO) engaged in promoting Integrated rural development program in Merhabete Woreda.' The idea that MfM was non-religious and non-political was reemphasised to me by many MfM staff in interviews, as a primary source of the credibility and legitimacy of the organisation. This was often contrasted with the government, which was characterised as engaged in politics. For example, one former MfM member of staff said that 'the support of government… was not that much. Because,

you know, they are politicians, they are more involved in their political aspect, not for this development aspect.'[178]

I was often told that the fact that MfM was not political helped it to gain acceptance in communities. Sometimes former staff told me that they were more accepted by communities than the regime itself. In conversations about the early phase of the project, when MfM had attempted to work through government DAs, I was told that this did not work because they had a 'double assignment': 'from the government side they are given another assignment from the project.'[179] This 'other assignment' referred to political duties. Another member of staff told me that, as well as promoting agricultural extension services, government DAs also had to collect taxes and recruit for the military. This meant that their acceptance drastically failed; they were 'hated' by the people. For this reason, MfM recruited its own DAs, and worked to convince people that they were a non-religious, non-political organisation, without any agenda other than working for people's own welfare.[180]

Also, later on in implementation, once MfM had its own DAs, former staff argued that they had achieved better community acceptance than the government, because officials had to mix development with politics. One former member of staff from the agriculture department recalled his time as a field coordinator, noting that 'the government is weak. You know, it is normally common' and that government development agents 'don't have the knowledge and the skill to convince the community. They just… if they have political

[178] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 7 November 2019.

[179] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 6 February 2020.

[180] Interview, MfM member of staff, 22 February 2019.

agenda, they go to the *kebele*, talk with the chairman.'[181] Another member of staff who had had a senior role in Merhabete explained how the MfM approach to model farmers was still achieving greater acceptance than the government at the time of our interview:

> The approach [on] the side of the government is completely different to the side of us… Even now, in [name of *wereda* where he was working], we [have] a good acceptance, better than the government development agents… So, the techniques we are using, the approach, the objective matters… we are concentrating *only* on development activities. The involvement of politics is completely damaging.[182]

The suggestion in these interviews is that government DAs had political responsibilities, such as recruiting for the military or campaigning for the ruling party, but MfM DAs could concentrate on development. This made farmers more willing to accept MfM than the regime.

Again, while these narratives are taken from interviews conducted ten years after the MIRDP closed, archival evidence suggests that they were also used at the time. For example, in the minutes of a meeting between Karlheinz Böhm and programme managers at MfM's Addis Ababa headquarters in 2007, there were complaints about officials and farmers being tied up in political meetings. One of the main problems identified in Merhabete was 'the low participation of woreda and other government institutions

[181] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 18 April 2019.

[182] Interview, MfM member of staff, 10 April 2019. Emphasis original.

because of continuous meetings.' There were similar complaints from the neighbouring *wereda* of Midda-Weremo: 'The problem of political/ government meetings is considerable, e.g. for community participation. Farmers are gathered frequently for such meetings, sometimes 10 or 15 days, sometimes even a month.' [183] These are, again, common complaints in the NGO community in Ethiopia. It seems plausible that these and other complaints were made locally during implementation of the MIRDP, and that they contributed to a broader narrative that MfM's approach to development was non-political, whereas the government's approach combined development and politics.

Importantly, the message that MfM was not political was not only repeated by MfM staff, but also filtered through into my conversations with ordinary residents of the district. As an elder insisted:

> MFM is a charity organization. They go from place to place doing good and helping people. They work for development; they have no other agenda… Nothing else!! MFM is not involved in politics or any other agenda. It's completely free of all that. If anyone thinks otherwise, let him debate with me face to face. It is an organization working for development. They want to help develop communities. It is not involved with politics.[184]

[183] MfM Addis Ababa archives. Box file – MERH 2005. 'Minutes: Meeting Program Managers', report of internal MfM meeting on 26 Jan 2007 in Addis Ababa featuring Karlheinz Böhm.

[184] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

The fact that MfM's mantra of being 'non-political' was not only repeated by former staff but also by other influential local people suggests that this resonated locally. Perhaps unsurprisingly, an organisation which brought developmental improvements and which did not collect taxes or impose political responsibilities such as campaigning for the ruling party proved to be popular. But for the regime this was potentially problematic, as it held out the possibility of a different kind of *mengist* which brought benefits without unpopular requirements and responsibilities.

This section has shown that MfM's use of developmentalist narratives in Merhabete did not simply position the regime and NGO together on one side as the 'aware', with residents on the other as 'lacking awareness'. This positioning was likely implied in certain situations, such as when MfM DAs visited households together with teachers. However, by repeating narratives around MfM's non-political nature, and by insisting that the regime should implement schemes initiated by MfM, the NGO's staff contributed to an impression that its awareness was different, and perhaps higher, than that of the regime. This was reflected in local conversations. Many people specifically situated MfM as the main source of awareness locally rather than the regime. For example, one farmer told me, 'before MfM we didn't care that much about things. It was MfM that made us aware'.[185] Another former model farmer said 'according to the awareness given to me by MfM I sent all my children to school to be educated – I didn't make any of them farmers, tying up my

[185] Interview, farmer, 22 September 2019.

cattle.'[186] Another man said 'Many times they [MfM] tried to teach and create awareness, since most of the society was not educated.'[187] Even state officials acknowledged the specific role of MfM in bringing awareness – for example a former health official said 'It's Menschen's work that has made the community to be more aware on family planning and it is still now used widely.'[188] These examples demonstrate that often people specifically linked awareness raising to MfM, rather than more generally to outsiders and the regime.

In some conversations, I came across references to awareness which situated it even more specifically with MfM in contrast to the regime. One model farmer was quoted in previous chapters as saying that 'MfM has raised awareness of what the government should have done.'[189] Here, the implication is that those who were 'aware' would realise that the regime was underperforming in comparison to the work of MfM, and would take a more critical view towards the regime. In a conversation with a former MfM member of staff about the 2005 elections, I was told that 'the workers were very aware and they came from different places… [they were] very aware and conscious.' The speaker linked this to the suggestion that some staff had privately campaigned for the opposition, as noted in chapter 6. This suggests that awareness was not seen as a preserve of the regime. On the contrary, those who were educated and urbanised were seen as being more critical towards it. This again suggested that development language could create a sense of a

[186] Interview, former model farmer, 9 January 2020.

[187] Interview, former recipient of social support with two adult children, 30 November 2019.

[188] Interview, former health officer, 28 May 2019.

[189] Interview, former model farmer, 191110.

divide between MfM and the regime, where MfM was positioned as having higher awareness.

To summarise this section, MfM made much use of developmentalist narratives in Merhabete. However, contrary to expectations, its use of development language generally did not reinforce the sense of MfM and the regime as joint bringers of development, still less the idea that the NGO was the junior partner in a regime-led development strategy. Rather, through tropes such as complaints that the government was not doing enough to follow up on MfM development work, and that the government was political whereas MfM was non-political, MfM situated itself as a purer or higher source of development than the regime. These ideas also resonated locally, and many people saw MfM as the main reason why people's 'awareness' had increased. This contributed significantly to situating MfM as 'above the government' whilst delegitimating the regime.

Developmentalist narratives and strategic alignment were not the only practices used by MfM to legitimate its work in Merhabete. Through my visits, I came to discover that two other practices were important in legitimating the NGO's work: the visits of Karlheinz Böhm, and the distribution of what I call 'symbolic benefits' such as the local fame conferred on model farmers, which went beyond material distribution. What these two practices had in common was that they both emphasised the distinction between MfM and the regime. They both contributed to the idea that MfM was something distinct and potentially superior to the local government.

The role of Karlheinz Böhm

One of the most significant means by which MfM sought local legitimacy was through the visits and the persona of its chairperson, Karlheinz Böhm. Böhm visited Merhabete regularly (generally at least once or twice per year) and in conversations a decade after the MIRDP ended, many people still had vivid recollections of these visits. They played a large part in people's memories of the project and in how they constructed its meaning.

Böhm was well aware of the importance of legitimating MfM and used his visits to build support for the NGO's work. He used practices of strategic alignment, for example at the opening of the hospital, and also drew on developmentalist narratives, for example in discussions about 'harmful traditional practices' such as FGM and early marriage. However, it was the choreography of his visits and the persona that he cultivated which played an especially important role in building the legitimacy of MfM locally. As an actor, Böhm was aware about his effect on an audience and used this both in raising funds in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and also during his visits to project sites in Ethiopia.

Böhm's visits to Merhabete were celebratory occasions which communicated a sense of his greatness, importance and seniority, and in this sense they resonated with some of the traditional images and practices associated with leadership in Amhara region. However, they also conveyed a sense that Böhm had a connection to ordinary people – a connection which was not traditionally displayed by leaders in Amhara. The sense of celebration and Böhm's importance was well captured in a description of a visit as told by an elder:

> He came, he came there, and it was night when he came. … So when we finished our drinks, we heard cars came honking. … They told me that Karl had come. A *ferenji* [Westerner] has come, I could not believe it, and I felt as if God came. A *ferenji* in [*kebele* name]? What do you mean? In this place, even the *wereda* [i.e. the *wereda* government] had not come to visit. … So, when he came, I told my friends, "Let's celebrate. A *ferenji* came to visit us. How can we be silent? Come carry him on your shoulder and let us celebrate." We carried him and celebrated, shouting and chanting … Then the translator told me that he's asking me to give him the stick I was holding. I was holding a small stick for celebration. I gave him the stick and he started celebrating with us waving the stick in the air. … He was laughing. He was very happy. Then the women and the youth also joined the celebration. They were all chanting and shouting. It was a big celebration. Even the holy days were not that big and this was all at night. If it had been during daytime, it would have been an even bigger celebration.[190]

This account echoes the descriptions of visits of the Ethiopian nobility in Donald Levine's work on Amhara political culture, reviewed in chapter 4 (Levine, 1965a). The sense of great celebration is palpable – the carrying on the shoulders, the shouting and chanting. It was clearly a memorable visit to be recounted so vividly after such a long time. The elder made comparisons with religious celebrations: 'Even the holy days were

[190] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

not that big'; 'I felt as if God came'. The description recalls Levine's account of the sense of magic and well-being from visits of the Ethiopian nobility. This came across in other accounts too. For example, one model farmer told me 'We felt like Karl came from the sky'.[191] As a comparison from the archives, a German visitor to Merhabete in 2006 observed, 'Mr Karl – Karlheinz Böhm – is in some places worshipped almost like a saint' (Rech, 2006: 226).

Yet in this description of Böhm's visit, he also comes across as something different from Ethiopian nobles whose interactions with ordinary people were formalized, consisting to a large extent of the giving of commands (Levine, 1965b: 155-67). He came unannounced, at night time, and without state officials; he waved a stick and laughed. He was clearly not the same as traditional authority figures.

The way that Böhm was interpreted locally represented an intriguing mix of continuity and discontinuity with the traditional Amhara ideas of authority. In many respects, he acted the part of a traditional, authoritative patron and was interpreted as such. When Böhm singled out a *kebele* for particular support, I was told people asked 'what's his tie to this place?... it's like it's his home town.'[192] Similarly, a former government health official told me 'Dr. Karl used to love this area as his birth place.'[193] I was told that Böhm had celebrated his eightieth birthday at Alem Ketema hospital in 2008, and had invited elders, officials and many others.[194] People interpreted his role in Merhabete as similar to that of

[191] Interview, former model farmer, 1 December 2019.

[192] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

[193] Interview, former official from *wereda* health office, 28 May 2019.

[194] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

a person originally from the district who had become wealthy and successful, and wanted to reinvest in the region of his birth.

In other respects, however, Böhm's visits expressed sharp differences from traditional expressions of authority in Amhara political culture. MfM staff recalled how Böhm would often hug children and the poor, which 'educated' people like staff were reluctant to do because of concerns about hygiene, and he would rest on their string beds, which was not at all common for authority figures.[195] This elicited reactions of shock initially, but many staff said they found it inspirational, an expression of Böhm's love for the poor. One former member of staff for MfM said:

> We observed often that Karl mostly used to wear one set of clothes and worked hard, closely with the community, and carried and hugged children and monitored the work. This encouraged us to work hard for the community where we grew up.[196]

Again here, the fact that Böhm lived close to the people, that he 'wore one set of clothes' (not changing every day), that he 'carried and hugged children' and was present in the district to 'monitor the work' conveyed a different kind of authority: one not based only on hierarchy and distance but on proximity to the poor.

In summary, the 'symbolic language and choreography' (Lund, 2006) employed by Böhm conveyed an impression of a great benefactor, which aligned to existing

[195] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 22 February 2019.

[196] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 5 February 2020.

understandings of the role of *mengist*. This was supplemented by the fact that Böhm was associated with the construction of schools, clinics and other forms of developmental infrastructure – which had already been strongly intertwined with the concept of *mengist* in the popular imagination.

Böhm therefore embodied the role of a patron who delivered a huge range of developmental improvements – a role which *mengist* itself was supposed to fulfil. However, Bohm also conveyed an impression that his authority was a different kind to that of *mengist*. One of the main differences between Böhm's self-presentation in Merhabete and traditional authority figures in Amhara was the way he communicated a sense of care and concern for the poor. Also, whilst Böhm often practiced strategic alignment, and was not averse to sharing a stage with regime figures, he did not always visit together with officials. In fact his presence was contrasted with regime absence in the account above ('In this place, even the *wereda* had not come to visit'). Combined with his status as a *ferenji*, these all contributed to a perception that his authority came from outside the hierarchical framework in which *mengist* was embedded ('we felt like Karl came from the sky'). Böhm came to be seen as above *mengist*, with better credentials as a source of development than the regime. This undermined the regime's claim to be delivering development and weakened its political dominance, as seen at the 2005 elections where people had wanted to vote for Böhm, and in phrases such as 'our government is Karl'.[197]

[197] Interview, two former model farmers, 2 May 2019.

Symbolic benefits to participants

A final way in which the MIRDP cultivated its legitimacy in Merhabete was through rewarding participants for their work with the project in symbolic ways. While participants such as model farmers, trainees, and recipients of 'social support' (see chapter 6) received material benefits such as daily allowances, animals, seedlings and so on, they were also rewarded in ways which did not involve resource transfer.

The group for which this was most obvious was model farmers. The most successful model farmers were feted by MfM for their 'exemplary' work and achieved a kind of local celebrity status. One model farmer I met had been featured in a film documentary produced by the German public service broadcaster ZDF, in which he had talked about the soil conservation work he had done and the new varieties of crops he was growing. The account of the filming was also written up for a MfM publicity book (Strieder and Strauss, 2001: 66-8). The farmer had kept a guest book with entries from various dignitaries who had visited him, including the German Ambassador. When I visited him, he recalled how he had been on television, and remembered being driven to Addis Ababa to celebrate the 25th anniversary of MfM's work in Ethiopia.[198]

Another model farmer was, if anything, even better known locally. He had been singled out for support personally by Böhm, perhaps because his house was conveniently located near the main road and Böhm would stop there on his way into or out of the district. Visiting this man, I heard about how Böhm had apparently celebrated his son's birthday in his house and many others from the local area had been invited. The farmer had also

[198] Interview, former model farmer, 9 January 2020.

been picked up in a car once and taken to visit Böhm in Addis Ababa. I also heard an account of the visit of German minister for development cooperation, Carl-Dieter Spranger, in 1996. This was a very memorable occasion. Senior staff had visited the farmer and selected a field for his helicopters to land in. They had told him to sleep overnight in the field to guard it. The next day, I was told, two helicopters landed there and thirty *ferenji* (Westerners) got out. The minister had asked the farmer what he needed most and he had replied, an ox. Money was provided for one on the spot.[199]

These farmers became relatively wealthy through the MIRDP, receiving resources like oxen, but it was not only material wealth which the project provided them. Connections to the project enhanced these people's social status and standing locally. This was related both to the material resources they had received and the interest of foreigners and educated people, which added to the sense that these people were important and deserved respect from other local residents.

Apart from model farmers, others who participated in the project also received symbolic benefits from MfM. For example, a student who had received 'social support' from MfM told me, 'There was an exercise book with the brand 'Globe'. If you had that book it was known you'd got it from Menschen.'[200] Whilst the 'Globe' brand book was a material resource, it had a symbolic value because it conveyed a message this person had been selected by MfM. Therefore, owning such a book increased an individual's status, as it indicated he or she had been chosen as having potential. This likely gave a boost to

[199] Interview, former model farmer, 26 September 2019.

[200] Interview, former *wereda* government official, 7 January 2020.

students' self-belief. Another person who told me about non-material benefits was an elder:

> I was awarded a certificate when the *wereda* [government] was also given an award. They called my name. I was shocked… they said it was for my participation in MfM for development work. It wasn't money you know. I'm glad because you know money is temporary.[201]

In this case a specific distinction between material and non-material benefits was drawn. The honour involved in this individual's receiving a certificate and having his name read out in a public meeting evidently meant something to him, to the extent that he recounted the story with animation over a decade later.

These anecdotes provide an illustration of how MfM cultivated connections in local society which went beyond material resource transfer. Through providing certain individuals with a sense of having been selected, of being important and valued, MfM sought to encourage people to participate in the project – which would help to break down people's suspicions of the project and its intentions. In making participation attractive, not only through increasing participants' material wealth but also their social standing locally, MfM developed the idea that the project was a legitimate enterprise.

Importantly, these practices also communicated a sense of the distinction between MfM and the regime. MfM brought film crews from Germany, flew in on helicopters, took

[201] Interview, two elders, 26 November 2019.

people away in cars, and provided modern exercise books. These strengthened local impressions that MfM was associated with modernity and development – to a greater extent than the regime. This was problematic for the regime as it once again delegitimised the claim that EPRDF was the main engine and source of development in Ethiopia.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the political legacy of MfM's legitimation practices in Merhabete, specifically the ways in which staff interacted with residents of the district through language and other symbolic, non-material practices. Similar to the previous chapters, this chapter has provided a story of confounded expectations. I expected that MfM's legitimation practices, including strategic alignment and developmentalist narratives, would enhance regime political dominance in Merhabete. Surprisingly, I found that although its staff did to a great extent pursue strategic alignment with the regime, the NGO nonetheless undermined the regime's own legitimating narratives and thus its political dominance.

The main reason why this happened was because MfM developed a strong identity as a source of development which was distinct from the regime, and was accepted as legitimate by the local population. The role of Karlheinz Böhm personally was an important factor in this process. His visits were remembered vividly; they had involved much celebration. In the accounts of these visits, there were similarities to the sense of magic and well-being associated with visits from the nobility in imperial Ethiopia. But Böhm also communicated through his visits a sense of difference from *mengist*. The way he was prepared to hug the poor and his unpretentious dress conveyed a closeness to the poor

that was missing both in traditional imagery of the Ethiopian aristocracy and in more modern iconography of the Derg and EPRDF regimes. Nonetheless, this perceived closeness and affection to the poor also resonated with narratives about bringing development – which was central to contemporary ideas of *mengist*.

The way that Böhm acted, and how he was perceived, played a major role in generating local understandings that MfM was a powerful organisation in its own right, with its own source of authority and legitimacy, and which was a source of development independent of the regime. The suggestion that people might have wanted to vote for Böhm, first presented in chapter 5, becomes easier to understand now, as he fulfilled many aspects of the ideal of *mengist*: an authority figure who cares for the poor and sends development. This was a vital element in explaining the puzzle reviewed throughout these empirical chapters: why a project which was a most likely case for strengthening regime dominance in fact undermined it.

Despite this, it is important to note that the role of Karlheinz Böhm was not the only decisive factor in explaining the puzzle. Leaving aside for now the factors explored in the two preceding chapters, this chapter has also presented other reasons why MfM came to be seen as a better or higher source of development than the regime. Probably the most significant among these was MfM staff's use of development language. Whilst staff used existing language around 'awareness' and 'awareness raising' which might have been expected to strengthen the sense of regime and NGO as joint bringers of development, a closer review revealed that the language they used set up distinctions between regime and MfM. When MfM staff requested officials to follow up on initiatives they had started, they invoked the idea that they were the leading force behind development in the district,

and officials should follow. When staff insisted that MfM was non-political, they invoked the idea of a form of development that was free from unpleasant responsibilities such as political campaigns and taxpaying obligations. These resonated locally, and many people identified MfM as the main source of awareness in the district. Beyond the use of development language, the chapter also reviewed the way the project distributed symbolic rewards to participants, increasing their social status beyond resource transfer through their association with foreigners and pride at having been selected. All these practices – alongside Böhm's personal role – contributed to developing local impressions of MfM as having a form of authority distinct from the regime.

The chapter therefore suggests the need for revision of the conceptual framework. Whereas the mechanism as theorised in chapter 3 suggests that projects will strengthen regime political dominance where they align with regimes and repeat developmentalist narratives, this chapter has shown that this was not sufficient. MfM staff did align with the regime, generally presenting an impression of working together with officials on joint priorities. They also used common developmentalist narratives which positioned the state as having responsibility to deliver development. The chapter demonstrates that a better way of understanding whether a development agency's legitimation practices reinforce or undermine regime political dominance is whether its staff present it as distinct from the regime or as analogous to, part of, or subordinate to, government. MfM emphasised distinctions from the regime in narratives about being non-political, in Böhm's visits, and in the use of symbolic benefits. I discuss this at more length in the next chapter.

The discussion in this chapter has not considered in detail how officials reacted to MfM's legitimation practices and it is worth a short reflection on this. To what extent did

officials realise that MfM was becoming understood as a superior source of development to the regime during implementation? Based on interviews and archives, my impression is that officials were not aware until the elections that MfM's presence in the district was a political threat. They thought, until that time, that they could present the work of MfM as something that the regime had facilitated. Only during the elections did it become clear that people did not credit the regime for bringing MfM to the area. After the elections, it seems that some officials did indeed suspect that MfM was 'messing with their politics:'[202] that is, that people's love for Böhm and MfM had created a political problem. At this point, there was clear tension between MfM staff and the regime. However, even then, officials avoided a major public rift with the NGO, most likely because being seen to respect and honour Böhm was important politically, given his great popularity in the district.

Finally, it seems that officials in Merhabete had little incentive to raise concerns about MfM to higher levels of the regime's hierarchy, given MfM's status as EPRDF's most favoured NGO. In 2011, the 30th anniversary of MfM's work in Ethiopia, a statue of Böhm was unveiled in a newly renamed 'Karl Square', in a prominent location in Addis Ababa. Former German President Horst Köhler and serving Ethiopian Foreign Minister (later Prime Minister) Hailemariam Dessalegn attended the inauguration. If officials locally had concerns about MfM impacting on regime political dominance, these concerns had certainly not reached the top levels of party and government.

The following chapter reviews the material from all three empirical chapters. It returns to the conceptual framework, identifying the areas where it correctly identified the key

[202] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 November 2019.

dynamics through which project influence authoritarian political dominance, and the areas where the empirical material suggests a need to refine the framework. Before doing this, it begins by bringing together a summary of the case of the MIRDP and its puzzling effects.

Chapter 8: Rethinking the effects of international development projects on authoritarian political dominance

The MIRDP is a striking case. It built schools, clinics, water points and a rural hospital, in line with the EPRDF regime's strategy of building a developmental state, and it avoided advocacy work on human rights and democracy. Its staff regularly appeared in public together with officials, involved them as trainers in its training courses, and supported government campaigns. MfM was celebrated by the regime, with statues of Karlheinz Böhm in Merhabete and Addis Ababa and programmes about his work on national television. The conceptual framework and initial analysis of the case suggested that this would make the MIRDP highly likely to strengthen regime dominance.

Despite all this, the project undermined the regime's political dominance in Merhabete. In multiple conversations, people contrasted the beneficence of MfM with regime neglect. They argued that 'we don't have any government here in Merhabete'[203], that the government 'was supposed to be a mother and a father for the poor' but that has done 'nothing', while 'Karl on the other hand has raised my children'[204] – and that 'MfM has raised awareness of what the government should have done.'[205] Even *kebele* functionaries agreed that MfM was 'above the government'.[206] People came to associate

[203] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 April 2019.

[204] Interview, former recipient of social support, 30 November 2019

[205] Interview, business owner and former model farmer, 14 November 2019.

[206] Interview, *kebele* official, formerly chairperson of *kebele* development committee, 2 May 2019.

development with MfM and not with the regime. This fundamentally delegitimated one of the government's core legitimating narratives of bringing development, which weakened public acceptance of EPRDF rule.

These effects had tangible political consequences. In the contested 2005 elections, people referred to the work of MfM as justification for opposing the regime. In reaction to the regime attempting to take credit for the work of MfM, people said they wanted to vote for Böhm or MfM.[207] They said things like 'Our government is Karl.'[208] Besides this, some MfM staff may have (privately) campaigned for the opposition.[209] All this likely fed into tensions in Merhabete around the elections; the *wereda* was one where there was greater unrest than in neighbouring areas (Ethiopian Herald, 2005; Ethiopian Review, 2005).

Also during my own visits to the *wereda* in 2018-20, at a time when unrest was again growing across Amhara, MfM remained a reference point for criticism of the regime. Tropes of regime neglect of Merhabete were widespread during my visits. Even a policeman admitted, 'Since they [MfM] left, the government almost forgot the *wereda*.'[210] One former security guard for MfM told me that if MfM had stayed in the area, it would have developed like he had heard that Tigray had developed.[211] The implication was that the regime had prioritized development in Tigray over areas like Merhabete.

This chapter draws on the previous three empirical chapters to explore why this happened, and to explain the puzzle presented throughout the thesis. To do this, it revisits

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[207] Informal conversation, two *kebele* officials, 27 November 2019.

[208] Interview, business owner and former model farmer, 14 November 2019.

[209] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 30 November 2019.

[210] Interview, policeman, 21 September 2019.

[211] Interview, farmer and former security guard, 22 September 2019.

the conceptual framework presented in chapter 3, and the prediction that the MIRDP would be a 'most likely case' put forward in chapter 4. The chapter seeks to refine the conceptual framework in the light of the empirical evidence uncovered in interviews and archives.

I identify two different types of issue with the conceptual framework and the predictions developed from it. Firstly, there are times when the conceptual framework accurately described the dynamics at play in the case of the MIRDP, but my predictions were wrong because they depended on too superficial a review of what the MIRDP was doing. This was the case, for example, with the resource distribution dynamics reviewed in chapter 6. The conceptual framework was right to suggest that where a regime controls a project's resources, its political dominance is likely to be strengthened. However, although the MIRDP appeared to be a project where the regime would have firm control of its resource distribution, a detailed ethnographic and historical review showed that it did not. This demonstrates the value of the methodology used in this thesis. Through listening closely to people's perspectives and understandings, and triangulating these with archival data, I could reveal that projects which appear to be strengthening regimes' dominance may in fact be weakening them.

Secondly, there were aspects where I found that the conceptual framework could not fully capture the dynamics that were at work in the MIRDP case. This was the case in chapter 7 on legitimation practices. The conceptual framework theorised that development projects can strengthen regime political dominance through strategic alignment and use of developmentalist narratives. It suggested that when development agencies align themselves with regimes, and when they buy into a vision of development

that is about bringing state-led development to the people, they are likely to strengthen regimes' dominance. I suggest this explanation is not sufficient, because MIRDP staff did this, but nonetheless still weakened regime dominance.

As an alternative rubric, I propose that projects are likely to strengthen regimes where they construct themselves, and are constructed in society, as an adjunct to the regime, as part of a wider regime-led development strategy. By contrast, where projects construct themselves as distinct from regimes, and even as superior (as 'above the government') – and crucially, when they are understood and accepted as such in society – they have the potential to weaken regime dominance.

In what follows below, I return to the conceptual framework, reviewing each mechanism to identify where it needs to be revised. After reviewing the mechanisms separately, I bring the threads together, reviewing connections between the mechanisms and emphasising how each fed into the other. In the final section of the chapter, I consider how far we can generalise from this case. I suggest that whilst the MIRDP may appear to be a rare case, there are reasons to believe that the findings here will be replicated elsewhere.

Revisiting the Conceptual Framework

Based on existing literature, the conceptual framework (chapter 3) theorised that development projects would likely strengthen regime political dominance when, firstly, they construct infrastructure and buildings for regimes, and do not develop a parallel system of service delivery through non-state buildings; secondly, when regimes maintain control of project resources, and these are not captured by groups which oppose the

regime; and thirdly, when projects align their activities and communications with regimes, using development language which emphasises the role of outsiders (development agencies and regimes) in bringing development to the people, rather than suggesting that people need to bring development to the regime. In chapter 4 I suggested that MIRDP was a most likely case for a project which was expected to strengthen regime political dominance through these mechanisms.

The empirical chapters have shown that this was not the case. An in-depth, long-term review of the effects of the MIRDP showed that either my predictions about the project had been inaccurate, or the conceptual framework itself had inadequately theorised the dynamics involved in the relationship between projects and regime dominance. In what follows below, I revisit the conceptual framework, taking each mechanism in turn and identifying where my predictions proved to be accurate; where the mechanism correctly identified the dynamics but a more detailed review proved the predictions wrong; and where the mechanism itself needs revision. These also point the way towards identifying the key gaps in the existing understandings of the relationships between aid and authoritarianism over the long term.

First mechanism: Building Structures

The conceptual framework theorised that structures built by development agencies can increase authoritarian political dominance in two ways. Firstly, they can increase state reach: the presence of the state apparatus across the territory. This in turn can underpin regime strategies for dominance in local areas – violent coercion, use of resources as incentives, and legitimating narratives. Secondly, built structures can convey a particular

image of the state or regime, which can underpin regime legitimating narratives. For example, aid-funded dams and railways can come to be seen as representing the modernity or progress that regimes argue they are bringing.

Taking the effects on state reach first, the theorised mechanism worked as expected. Structures built by MIRDP including roads, clinics, schools and the hospital increased the regime's reach. Most of the buildings constructed by MfM were in good condition at the time of my visits to Merhabete and were still being used by officials (though there were some exceptions including water points and veterinary clinics). The MIRDP led to a dramatic increase in the presence of schools and clinics across the *wereda*. There were indications that these structures were not only involved in providing health and education services but also supported regime dominance strategies. As seen in reports from MfM staff, the hospital was enrolled in these strategies, including through processes of *gim gema* where party discipline was imposed on staff, and through resources such as the ambulance being used to transport soldiers during election time.

This is the element of the conceptual framework where predictions were most accurate. However, it is also the element of the framework which is least established in the existing literature. In studies which consider how aid bolsters authoritarian rule, there are many more accounts which review the role of patronage and international signalling than those which look at the role of structures built by development agencies. Although there are some fascinating studies which consider how aid-funded infrastructure can bolster authoritarian regimes (see for example Bachmann and Schouten, 2018; Bachmann et al., 2022; Huda, 2022; Schouten et al., 2022; Terrefe, 2022), these have so far not been well

incorporated into wider literature on aid and authoritarianism. This study therefore makes a contribution by integrating this perspective into a more comprehensive account.

Despite this, there was one element of the case as revealed in the empirical chapters which suggested a need for a refinement to the conceptual framework. This was that the project had effectively built a network of *kebele* offices for the regime by handing over former MfM *kebele* field offices. It also provided the regime with some important offices in Alem Ketema including that of the *wereda* agriculture bureau.

This finding has two implications. Firstly, it suggests that projects which construct local government offices are face particular risks of increasing regime political dominance. Schools and clinics can be enrolled in regime dominance strategies, but for local government officials this is their bread and butter: they are the main actors at a local level who are tasked with disseminating regime narratives and withholding state resources from those who oppose the regime. In building offices for local government, projects can significantly enhance regime reach. By contrast, some forms of infrastructure, such as water points, are less vulnerable to being captured as part of regime dominance strategies because they do not offer the regime the same opportunities for disseminating legitimating narratives and facilitating violent coercion. Whilst these kinds of structures are not immune from regime capture, they involve a lower level of risk compared with local government offices.

The second implication is that it is important to consider the effects of the structures projects build for their own purposes, alongside those they build as ‘outputs’ of their projects. In the case of the MIRDP, built structures such as roads, clinics and schools were tracked, monitored and counted, and presented publicly in documents such as

evaluations and publicity materials. However, there is no record of the number of MfM field offices and staff residences. Yet the field offices in *kebeles* had a large impact on regime reach in the district. In other cases, structures built by development agencies for their own purposes may have equally important effects, which may increase or decrease regime reach. For example, if such structures are taken over by non-state actors, such as other NGOs or rebel organisations, these may negatively impact on regimes' political dominance. Either way, it seems clear that tracking the effects of structures built by development agencies for their own use is an important aspect of their overall political effects.

Turning to regime image, in this case the mechanism did not function as expected. In the conceptual chapter, drawing on existing studies, I had theorised that agencies which construct modern buildings and infrastructure and pass these to the state in authoritarian contexts are likely to strengthen regime dominance, by identifying the state with modernity and progress (Terrefe, 2022; Huda, 2022; Anand et al., 2018). By contrast, projects that construct buildings that emphasise separation between regime and external interveners were expected to undermine regime dominance (see Bakonyi, 2022; Smirl, 2015; Lemay-Hébert, 2011).

In the case of the MIRDP, this did not apply. MfM built many modern buildings and handed them to the regime, but ten years after project closure these had not enhanced regime image; in fact the opposite happened. People firmly rejected the idea that the regime could claim credit for what MfM had constructed. They made comparisons between MfM and the regime, making long lists of infrastructural facilities which they attributed to MfM and arguing that in comparison the regime had done 'nothing' or had

'forgotten' the *wereda*. The structures built by MfM undermined the regime's legitimating narratives and thus its political dominance.

This implies that the existing understandings of the relationship between project-built structures and regime dominance, as set out in the conceptual framework, need to be refined. It is possible for external funders to construct modern buildings and infrastructure and hand them over to the state, and still undermine the regime's image. Whether this happens is likely to depend on *whether the agency involved in building these structures is understood as an adjunct to the regime, or as something distinct and superior*. The reasons why MfM became constructed as distinct from and superior to the regime in Merhabete relate to aspects of all three mechanisms. I will outline here the reasons linked to construction of infrastructure; the subsequent sections will demonstrate how other aspects of the mechanisms were also linked into this process.

Based on the evidence of the MIRDP, it is more likely that people will understand a development agency which builds infrastructure as distinct from and superior to the regime when the scale of its construction is sufficiently large – where the agency builds much more infrastructure than the regime. If a development agency builds one or two structures in a context where a regime is building many more, the agency is unlikely to be seen as superior. However, in contexts where donors and NGOs construct many facilities and the regime constructs few or none, people may credit agencies rather than regimes for this work. Secondly, the structures will be easily identifiable as having been built by the agency and not by the regime. This may be achieved by public branding and logos identifying them with the development agency, or through people's memories if

these strongly identify them with the agency (for example if they were involved in construction, or if there was a memorable opening ceremony, etc).

Thirdly, as chapter 5 showed, a project's material legacy can invoke the sense of a development agency as distinct from the regime through its wider impact on the built environment, beyond the formal outputs such as roads, schools and clinics. A decade after project closure, Merhabete was still covered with a large number of MfM billboards, for example urging people to use condoms and iodized salt, and not to marry early. These reminded people of MfM's paternal care. MfM also bequeathed a series of structures which were allowed to crumble, such as veterinary clinics. These served as a reminder that the agency had been able to manage more developmental facilities than the regime. This was of course also related to the scale of the NGO's work. Officials had good reasons for not prioritising these, but in doing so they ignored the ideational consequences of leaving development ruins in the landscape.

The findings on this element of the mechanism are relevant to wider debates on the political effects of externally-financed infrastructure projects. While it is widely understood that structures built by external funders that convey images of modernity will likely legitimate regimes' rule, this thesis demonstrates that this is not necessarily always the case. This has implications for debates about the political consequences of, for example, large modern Chinese infrastructure projects in Africa. If regimes succeed in establishing themselves in the popular imagination as the driving force behind these projects, they may indeed reap rewards in terms of enhanced legitimacy. However, if China or other external funders are perceived as distinct and superior to the regime, people may come to critique regimes for their relative inaction compared with these donors. This finding in

fact aligns with recent research on the effects of Chinese aid (Atitianti, 2023; Atitianti and Asiamah, 2023).

Second mechanism: Distributing resources

Based on the existing literature, the conceptual framework theorised that development projects whose resources are captured by regimes are likely to strengthen their political dominance, because they can then be integrated into regime strategies of co-optation and coercive distribution. It noted that in certain contexts such as in Somalia, the resources associated with development projects may be captured by other actors and in these cases regimes' dominance may be weakened (Elder, 2022; see also Narang, 2015; Zürcher, 2017; Abeytia et al., 2023). In chapter 4, I suggested that the MIRDP was highly likely to strengthen regime dominance because – though it did not pass many resources through state systems – many of its resources were invested into built structures which were passed to the regime, and regarding its other resource flows, these were likely to be captured by the EPRDF regime. This was because the regime was generally seen as very effective in managing the resources of donor and NGO projects, directing them towards regime priorities (Lavers, 2024; Chinigò, 2022; Clapham, 2018; de Waal, 2015).

In this case, the mechanism itself correctly captured the dynamics at work, but my predictions about the MIRDP were proved wrong. This was because I overestimated the extent of control that the regime would have over the MIRDP's resources. Officials did succeed in obtaining significant influence over certain resources, particularly training, which was the easiest resource stream for officials to supervise and control. Lists of trainees had to be signed and sealed by *kebele* officials. Furniture, tools and equipment

provided to schools, the hospital and the TVET college also enhanced regime reach, while 'top up' payments to officials provided another potential source of patronage. But beyond this, regime control of resource distribution was less complete than I had envisaged.

In particular, the MIRDP's agricultural inputs were subject to very limited control, even though these inputs were generally enrolled in regime strategies of coercive distribution in many parts of rural Ethiopia. The reason for this was that agricultural inputs under the project were distributed using a labour-intensive targeting process involving the concept of the model farmer. Being a model farmer for MfM did not involve simply receiving inputs, but also attending various meetings and following unfamiliar agricultural practices. Officials could not control distribution simply by nominating individuals, because many of these would drop out of the programme if they did not keep up with MfM's requirements. This was ultimately also a question of scale; the regime did not have the staff time to be able to monitor everything that MfM Development Agents were doing, and to ensure that its chosen farmers remained selected as MfM model farmers. Officials appeared to be content with prioritising oversight of built structures and training, apparently regarding distribution of benefits to model farmers as insufficiently threatening to be worth the devotion of large amounts of staff time.

The other major resource which was not subject to regime control was staff salaries and wages. Including allowances, medical expenses and compensation, these constituted around 8% of the project's total budget, a significant proportion of the total.[212]

[212] Author's own calculations based on tables in 'Menschen für Menschen, Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project, Terminal Report for the Year 2003-04, November 2004' and 'Menschen für Menschen, Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project, Terminal Report for the Project Period 2005-2007, March 2008'.

MfM enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy in hiring staff in Merhabete. There were a few examples of officials recommending certain individuals for employment with MfM, for example as security guards, but these were rather the exception than the rule. Many people who were out of favour with the EPRDF regime, including former Derg cadres, were employed by the project. Also, these individuals had influence on wider resource distribution practices under the project, for example recommending people to receive social support. Officials again appeared to have judged that control of MfM hiring practices was impractical and insufficiently threatening to their political dominance, deciding instead to focus on monitoring other issues such as construction of infrastructure.

In practice, however, the lack of control over agricultural inputs and staff salaries did pose political problems for the regime – both during implementation and over the longer term. MfM staff and model farmers, together with recipients of social support, were some of the people who were most likely to cite the ideas that the NGO was distinct and superior from the regime during my own visits a decade after the project closed. This was both because they were not financially dependent on the regime, and because they felt a personal debt of gratitude to MfM for the support they had received. They were influential people within the district, who had an influence over wider public discourse. They therefore played a key role in propagating the idea that MfM was ‘above the government’, both at critical moments during implementation (such as the 2005 elections) and for many years afterwards.

Whilst officials never achieved – or even apparently sought – significant control over the distribution of these resources, they did react to the fact that staff and model farmers were weakening regime political dominance. In particular after 2005, where this threat

became clearer, relations between officials and MfM distinctly soured, as recorded in the *wereda* archives.[213] I was told that the *wereda* government encouraged MfM to leave 'because people like Karl more than the government'.[214] At least locally, then, some officials recognised that the project was a political problem. Also, at the same time, the regime appeared to recognise the political benefit that the model farmer concept offered and introduced a version of this nationally. But despite this, any negative reputation that MfM acquired with the regime at this time stayed local; at the national level the NGO's reputation remained strong. This was due to Böhm and other staff's efforts to keep senior regime figures happy and because, after all, MfM was building many structures which were enhancing regime reach.

Returning to the conceptual framework, these findings have two implications. Firstly, the framework correctly identified that where regimes control project resources this is likely to strengthen their dominance and where resources escape regime control their dominance is more likely to be weakened. However, regimes' control of development resources may be less total than many studies imply. Even regimes with significant capacity and a high degree of loyalty of the civil service towards the party, such as EPRDF under Meles Zenawi, may not be able to keep control of all development agency resource flows. This applies especially where projects operate on a large scale. In these cases, there is scope for projects to have negative effects on regime political dominance without

[213] Merhabete Wereda Archives. Box File M9 – 'NGOs'. Letter from *wereda* agriculture and rural development office to the *wereda* administration office, subject: 'Observations on the MfM Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project', dated 30/9/97 E.C. (7 June 2005).

[214] Interview, business owner and former model farmer, 14 November 2019.

officials realising, at least for certain periods of time. This also illustrates the value of the methods used in this study, which revealed these aspects not identified in other studies.

Secondly, there is a need for a modest refinement to the mechanism as set out in the conceptual framework. This concerns the long-term consequences of projects' resource distribution practices. In the conceptual framework, I recognised that patterns of resource distribution could have long term consequences, but in practice these were even more important than anticipated. Whilst officials during implementation may have believed they had control over most, or at least the most important, of the MIRDP's resources, the lack of control they had over agricultural inputs and staff salaries became more significant in the longer term. Former staff and former model farmers were still influential in the district a decade after the project closed. Resources received through the project had made them less dependent on the regime's patronage and therefore emboldened them to criticise what they saw as regime neglect without fear of reprisal. These effects could also apply elsewhere and have so far received little attention: they could usefully be tracked in other projects.

Third mechanism: Legitimation practices

Based on established understandings of how aid influences authoritarian rule, I theorised that development projects would likely strengthen regime political dominance where the implementing agency practiced strategic alignment, and where it used developmentalist narratives which stressed the joint role of state and development agency in bringing development. I suggested that, where agencies aligned their activities and communications with those of the regime, avoided advocacy and direct criticism, they

were likely to strengthen regime political dominance. By contrast, if they did not align activities towards regime priorities, advocated for particular policies, or publicly contested the regime, they were more likely to weaken it. Also, if they used developmentalist narratives which emphasised NGOs' role as a counterweight to government, this might undermine regime dominance.

Once again, in the case of the MIRDP, this did not apply. With few exceptions, MfM staff maintained strong relations with officials, appeared frequently in public with them, and coordinated activities very closely. Staff even served on government committees and helped local officials with their work, for example encouraging parents to send to children to school. Despite periods where relations were more strained, overall MfM practiced strategic alignment with the regime, certainly in comparison with other NGOs in the country. MfM also repeated narratives about 'awareness' or 'consciousness' which implied a concept of 'bringing state-led development to the people', situating the state (or regime) as a joint bringer of development together with MfM. This also explains MfM's reputation in the NGO sector as an organisation that the government loved but which was seen as neglecting to make the government accountable.[215] Yet despite all this it undermined regime political dominance.

To a certain extent, this finding can be explained by a more careful and detailed review of MfM practices that goes beyond a superficial first impression – a review which draws on the perspectives of people whose lives intersected with those projects. Whilst staff really did align many activities with regime priorities, they also more subtly emphasised

[215] Interview, consultant and former NGO member of staff, 22 June 2018.

differences between regime and NGO in their use of language. As shown in chapter 7, MfM staff used narratives which implied that the government was not fully committed to development, that 'they should have been the ones' who were driving MfM but in fact it was MfM which was driving officials to do more.[216] Also, MfM staff insisted that the NGO was 'non-political', in contrast to the regime which they criticised for its focus on politics instead of development.

These narratives carved out space between MfM and the regime, indicating that although they were both engaged in delivering development, MfM was more committed to this cause and it did not contaminate it by mixing it with politics. In other words, despite MfM's use of developmentalist narratives which were expected to legitimate outside intervention from both the regime and development agencies, a more detailed review revealed that their narratives implied a hierarchy where MfM was the senior or more committed partner. A similar picture could also be drawn regarding alignment. Whilst generally MfM aligned strongly with the regime, there were some occasions, in particular early on in implementation, and also towards the end, where a more adversarial relationship had existed. These occasions lived on in memory and helped to reinforce an awareness that the regime and MfM were not 'one body'.[217]

This explanation, however, does not fully account for the dynamics of the case of the MIRDP. Ultimately, explaining projects' ideational effects on regimes' political dominance purely in terms of strategic alignment and developmentalist narratives is not sufficient, and a revision to the conceptual framework is needed. This is because, compared to other

[216] Interview, former MfM member of staff, 17 April 2019.

[217] Interview, MfM member of staff, 22 February 2019.

NGOs and development agencies MfM was still very close to the regime in terms of its alignment and use of narratives. As indicated in the section on building structures, a more appropriate way of describing what happened in Merhabete was that *a development agency had become understood as distinct from the regime and as a superior source of development*. This case shows that this can happen even when a development agency closely aligns its activities with an authoritarian regime.

As with the first mechanism, the next logical question is: when are development agencies likely to become understood as distinct from and superior to the regime – as 'above the government'? This thesis suggests that multiple different elements can contribute to this outcome. The previous two mechanisms have already provided part of the answer: the scale of the project was important, as was the branding of structures, making MfM's contribution visible for a long time after project closure. MfM staff and former model farmers also played a vital role in propagating the narrative that the NGO was distinct and better at delivering development than the regime. However, chapter 7 reveals further important ideational dynamics, concerning the way that MfM staff presented the NGO and the way these were received.

As has already been indicated, MfM staff constructed an identity for the NGO as fundamentally separate from the regime through their use of developmentalist narratives. Beyond this, one of the main ways in which MfM constructed a distinct identity was through Böhm's visits. These conveyed the sense that he was very senior leader, who was understood as both similar to existing authority figures and at the same time as fundamentally different. In some ways his role was understood as analogous to that of a traditional patron or benefactor from the area ('Dr. Karl used to love this area as his birth

place'[218]). But his visits also brought across his differences from these, in particular the way he dressed unpretentiously and was prepared to hug the poor. In this way, he conveyed both authority and difference from the regime. At least as important as the way that Böhm presented himself was the way he was received and understood. His visits resonated in rural Amhara because they had the right balance between drawing on existing tropes of authority and gently challenging these.

A further way in which MfM's distinct identity was constructed, besides Böhm's visits and the use of developmentalist narratives, was the deployment of symbolic benefits. Through elevating individual farmers' social status by filming them and introducing them to foreign dignitaries, through distributing awards such as certificates and certain materials such as textbooks to social support beneficiaries, MfM reinforced the sense of its being separate from the regime and hinting at the greater and more modern resources (like modern film cameras) it had at its disposal.

It is important to note that the way MfM staff presented the NGO was only part of the reason why people came to see it as distinct and superior to the regime. At least as important was the way these representations were received and understood. As indicated earlier, Böhm's visits were calibrated to resonate with local understandings of authority in Amhara. It is also worth noting that people's specific understandings and expectations of the state played an important role here. As shown in chapter 4, in Amhara the concept of *mengist* has fused together traditional patrimonialism, the need to look after the poor, with the specific claim that the state should deliver development. In contexts where people

[218] Interview, former official from *wereda* health office, 28 May 2019.

have similarly strong expectations that it is the state's role to deliver development, we might see similar effects. In contrast, where people have very low expectations of the state, they are less likely to identify an external development agency as fulfilling a role which should properly be carried out by the state. In these cases, they might be more likely to credit regimes for at least attracting development agencies to work in their local area.

Bringing the framework together: connections between the mechanisms

While the analysis in this chapter has so far presented the mechanisms separately for analytical clarity, it has already been shown that they are closely linked in various ways. This section now summarises the argument by bringing the different strands of the argument together, emphasising how the different mechanisms interacted with each other.

The thesis presents a case of a development project which, on the one hand, strengthened regime political dominance through extending that regime's reach across territory; and on the other hand, undermined regime political dominance through fundamentally weakening one of the regime's core legitimating narratives – the claim to be delivering development. The claim that a project can strengthen regime reach through building structures is relatively novel in the literature on aid and authoritarianism. The account in this thesis therefore represents a contribution to that literature. Nonetheless, it was in line with the expectations as set out in chapters 3 and 4, as the project had been chosen as a 'most likely case' for strengthening regime dominance. I therefore devote more attention to the surprising finding that such a case could weaken regime dominance

by undermining the regime's legitimating narratives. At the end of this sub-section I consider how the two different findings interacted with each other.

To sum up the findings of the previous three sub-sections on how MfM undermined regime political dominance, it did so by becoming established in the popular imagination as superior to the regime ('above the government'), and an example of what a better *mengist* might have looked like ('Karl did what the government was supposed to do'). [219] I propose that other projects might have similar effects if development agencies become understood as distinct from, and superior to, the incumbent regime in terms of their ability to deliver development – and if delivering development is understood as a core function of the state.

The next question following from this is when we can expect projects to become constructed as superior to regimes. In the case of the MIRDP, four key elements were at work in producing this outcome. They were, firstly, the large scale and visibility of the MIRDP's development work in comparison to that of the local government; secondly, the role of Böhm and other MfM staff in presenting MfM as distinct from the regime, and importantly, how these representations were understood locally; thirdly, the fact that the regime did not have full control of resource distribution, and the long-term consequences that followed from this; and fourthly, the fact that officials did not realise until relatively late on that the project might be undermining regime political dominance. In what follows below, I expand on each of these and review what they might imply for other cases.

[219] Interview, business owner and former model farmer, 14 November 2019.

The sheer scale of the development work that MfM did in Merhabete was a vital contributor to the outcomes seen in this thesis. Its budget was likely several times larger than that of the local government. Equally important was the fact that its work was clearly visible over the long term. In other cases, if development agencies carry out a lot more developmental work than the regime, similar effects may be seen, but if regimes do as much or more than development agencies then these effects are unlikely to materialise. The fact that MfM had specifically constructed infrastructure was also important, because these facilities were still highly visible a decade after project closure. It is possible to imagine that projects which do not construct infrastructure might have similar effects, but the visibility of their work is likely to be an important consideration.

The second critical element of the case was how MfM staff constructed the agency as distinct from the regime, and how this was received locally. As set out earlier, this was done through Böhm's visits, through narrative tropes, for example that MfM was 'non-political', and through other practices including deployment of symbolic benefits. It was important that these practices resonated with local understandings of authority and of development, and in particular that delivering development was understood as a central responsibility of the regime. In other projects, the precise way in which development agency staff characterise their role will be important in determining whether they have similar effects to the MIRDP. For example, if they describe themselves as '50 Per Cent Government,' as 'working to support government to achieve development for their people' (Dodworth, 2022: 93-4), they may not have similar effects. However it is important to note that NGOs which align closely with regimes, which deliver services, and which generally accept a vision of development which involves 'bringing state-led development to the

people' can still present themselves as distinct from, and potentially superior to, regimes and thus can undermine their political dominance.

The third element was the long-term role of staff and recipients of support. This is an example of how two mechanisms in the conceptual framework are tightly interlinked. Regime control of resource distribution was not total, which meant that certain groups who were not necessarily predisposed to support the regime – educated people with a background in the area, and better-off farmers – received significant resources from the project. Both during implementation and also in the longer term, these individuals became some of the most vocal proponents of narratives that MfM was distinct from and superior to the regime. This was connected to the fact that they had built on the support they had received to reduce their longer-term dependence on resources commanded by the state. To return to the terminology of the conceptual framework, the fact that these people were less vulnerable to regime strategies of coercive distribution made them more likely to point out how the regime failed to live up to its developmentalist legitimating narratives. This also underlines how the effects of the project were not limited to weakening regime legitimacy but affected political dominance understood more broadly. Due to former staff and model farmers' relative material independence from the regime, they were more willing than others in the area to express their dissatisfaction with it publicly, rather than simply to hold a negative view of it in private.

The above indicates that the role of particular groups of people is important in the spread and uptake of narratives about development agencies which relate to regime political dominance. Where other projects transfer resources to certain groups and where these transfers are largely outside of the control of the regime, these people may play a

role in disseminating and advocating for those agencies' own narratives. In these processes, staff, and former staff, play a particularly important role.

The fourth element of the outcome was the reaction from officials. Officials in Merhabete appeared to be unaware of the fact that the MIRDP was undermining regime political dominance until late on in project implementation. They concentrated on supervising the project's construction activities, in line with the regime priority of building a developmental state, and also influencing the distribution of some of its resources including especially training with its associated allowances. Their relative blindness to the effects of the project on their legitimating narratives is demonstrated by the fact that they attempted to take credit for MfM's work at the time of the 2005 elections. Officials' inability to spot the negative political consequences of the project for the regime likely related to their single-minded pursuit of Meles Zenawi's development vision which focused on building a developmental state, as well as the messages from the top of government which indicated that MfM was an ally in the regime's fight against poverty. MfM's very strong relations with officials at national level also likely protected the Merhabete project.

Applying this to other cases, it is first worth noting that officials in Ethiopia under EPRDF were generally seen as highly loyal to the party and focused on implementing regime dominance strategies. This suggests that in other contexts officials may be even less aware if their dominance is being undermined in similar ways. But more generally, similar effects may exist in cases where hierarchical bureaucracies coincide with development agencies that cultivate strong relationships with the top level of these bureaucracies.

Before moving to the next section, one further reflection can be made on how the different mechanisms in the conceptual framework can interact. The MIRDP had complex effects on EPRDF political dominance: it increased the regime's reach whilst undermining its legitimating narratives. It is worth a brief review of the way in which these two effects interacted. In increasing regime reach, the project facilitated the expansion of the regime's local structures in rural areas, bringing party members closer to the people, increasing the capacity of the regime to monitor citizens, move soldiers or militia to rural areas, and propagate legitimating narratives. At the same time, it increased the scepticism of many people towards the regime, particularly its claims to be delivering development. In this sense the project's effects were perhaps comparable to some of those seen as part of urbanisation processes. In cities and towns, governments can access populations more easily than in sparsely-populated rural areas, but conversely people in these areas are often more critical of regimes. Many development projects bring resources and people from urban areas to rural ones, at the same time as they build roads which facilitate better links between these areas. It is perhaps not surprising if they end up not only increasing government access to these areas but also increasing the influence of other urban actors, including the political opposition.

Generalising from the case of the MIRDP

The previous section has already begun the work of generalising from the MIRDP, by suggesting parameters for cases where similar effects might be found or not found. This section complements this by briefly considering how unique the case of the MIRDP is, and the likelihood of finding similar effects elsewhere. As this is a single case study, it

would not be appropriate to use it to develop ‘scope conditions’ for the effects observed. The principal contribution of this thesis is to set out detailed mechanisms through which projects can potentially strengthen or undermine regime political dominance, which the previous section has done. Nonetheless, it is not unreasonable to ask how frequently we might expect to find other cases where authoritarian political dominance was undermined by a development project in similar ways, and this section offers some brief reflections on this question.

The starting point here is the fact that the MIRDP was selected as a most likely case: there are a number of features of the project which made it *more* likely than other cases to strengthen authoritarian political dominance. For example, in Ethiopia under EPRDF – especially Amhara region – the regime had significant control over development resources. Senior regime actors had identified NGOs, with their resource streams, as a potential threat to their rule. Officials were tasked with monitoring NGOs and ensuring that their resources were distributed to those on government lists. They were generally loyal to the regime and regarded maintaining its dominance as a core part of their role. In other contexts, regimes have much less control over development projects’ resource flows. Where regime rule is more fragile or contested, or where officials are less capable or less loyal to the regime, there is potential for development resources to be much more detrimental to regime political dominance.

The MIRDP was also a most likely case because it was run by an NGO which aligned itself very closely to the regime. MfM was regarded by other NGOs in Ethiopia as unprofessional, beloved by the government but insufficiently focused on making government accountable. There were many other NGOs who were much more critical

towards the regime. Even among service delivery NGOs in Ethiopia, MIRDP was one of the closest to the regime, and was willing to profess public support for it even when other NGOs were more cautious. Again, this suggests that there may be many other NGOs which have even more significant effects in undermining regime dominance.

This all suggests that there may well be other cases where development projects undermine regime political dominance. However, if this refers only to cases where regimes have limited authority or where NGOs adopt stridently anti-regime rhetoric, this is not in itself especially surprising. The more interesting question concerns cases where international development agencies, at least on the surface, appear to be maintaining collaborative relations with regimes, and where regime dominance in society appears strong. In these kinds of cases, should we expect to find other development projects which are undermining regime political dominance?

I would argue that we should. The analysis in the previous section implies that where a development agency is understood as distinct from, and superior to, a regime, and where the regime stakes its legitimacy on delivering development, projects can undermine regime political dominance. This suggests that the pool of cases with similar effects to the MIRDP may not be that small. Certainly, there are examples of projects which we would not expect to undermine regime dominance – for example, budget support arrangements where donors provide funding to regimes and do not publicly criticise them, or certain types of NGO projects which are consistently and publicly branded as supporting government development initiatives. However, one can imagine that many different kinds of project might have analogous effects to the MIRDP. These could include, for example, other local or international NGOs with a strong identity and

support in a particular area, built up over many years; a longstanding partnership between an international donor and a particular country or subregion of a country, where the donor is seen as a protector or patron for that area (the reputation of the UK in Kosovo comes to mind, although this of course has military and diplomatic overtones); or potentially Chinese infrastructure construction in parts of Africa, where it is possible to imagine that the country may become established in the popular imagination as a powerful source of development independent from the regime (in fact recent studies have found an association between Chinese aid and reduced trust in governments - see Atitianti, 2023). Whether these cases in fact involve undermining of regime political dominance in ways similar to the MIRDP would require further research; but it seems plausible that they might.

There remains the possibility that there is a particular aspect of this case which plays a major role in explaining its effects, but is rarely found in other projects. If there is a feature of the MIRDP like this, it could limit the potential for generalising from the case. As regards most of the key elements of this case outlined in the previous section, this is not a major concern, as these elements are also found across other cases. Donors and NGOs often invest more in particular areas than regimes. Although there are significant restrictions on the activities of development agencies in many authoritarian states, regimes generally do not attempt to micro-manage these agencies' employment practices. The tropes used by MfM around its non-political character and the fact that the regime should carry on the work it had started are also commonly expressed by NGO and donor staff.

There is, however, one element of this case which is rarely found among other projects: the personal role of founder Karlheinz Böhm. There are not many other NGOs or development agencies that are so closely linked to one person. Major NGOs such as Save the Children, Oxfam, or Médecins Sans Frontières may be led by charismatic individuals, but they are not so intimately tied to these people personally. Perhaps the only development organisations which are similarly personalised are the philanthropic foundations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation or George Soros's Open Society Foundation. Yet these people spend less time than Böhm did engaging directly with the recipients of their support.

Nonetheless, I would suggest this factor, important though it was, was not necessarily decisive. This is supported by the case of the NGO World Vision, which also worked over a long time period in a particular district of Amhara region in Ethiopia. Antsokia na Gemza *wereda* is also in the North Shewa zone of Amhara, some 150km from Merhabete. World Vision started its operations there during the famine in the 1980s, at which time it ran a feeding centre and a health clinic. Over time, this morphed into an area development programme which had many similarities with the MIRDP. It built schools, health clinics and water points, and developed agricultural extension services, providing farmers with seeds, tools and training. It also encouraged farmers to plant tree varieties which would control soil erosion. Finally there was a child sponsorship scheme which had similarities to the 'social support' provided under the MIRDP. However, importantly, World Vision was not closely associated with an individual like MfM. Whilst it had charismatic presidents, these changed over time and did not have the opportunity to visit Antsokia as often as Böhm visited Merhabete.

In publicity materials on World Vision's website, beneficiaries are quoted saying things which are uncannily familiar to those found in this thesis. For example a 'local government representative responsible for some 30,000 people' talks at length about how the NGO had saved the people of the valley during the famine and afterwards. He says 'World Vision belongs to Antsokia; Antsokia belongs to World Vision… Ask any member of the village, and that is what you'll hear. We belong to each other.' Another beneficiary is perhaps even more striking: he was sponsored under the child sponsorship scheme 'from the start of school until his university graduation day' and later became employed with Médecins Sans Frontières. He is quoted as saying 'I am an example of how sponsoring a child has such impact. I consider myself a son of World Vision' and 'World Vision is in all of our hearts. It's the jewel of Antsokia Valley.'

These quotes provide a powerful indication that the quasi-patrimonial relationship between Karlheinz Böhm and the people of Merhabete was not unique and can develop in other cases. The phrase 'son of World Vision' provides a very direct example of patrimonial logic, and this is also indicated in the quote from the government representative who stresses the relationship of 'belonging' between Antsokia and World Vision. There is a similar sense of World Vision as a distinct source of development, similar to MfM in Merhabete. MfM and World Vision operated close to each other in North Shewa zone, but the people in each zone developed a sense of belonging to different NGOs. The important point to stress here, however, is that people developed the sense of belonging to World Vision even though it lacked a personal patron similar to Böhm. The role of child sponsorship is also important to consider here. MfM did not operate a sponsorship scheme as many other NGOs did, but these quotes indicate that such

sponsorship schemes can potentially lead to the establishment of similar imagined ties between benefactors and beneficiaries.

The case of World Vision in Antsokia indicates there may be similar dynamics in other projects without personalised patrons, but of course in other respects it was very similar to the MIRDP. It is possible that other elements of both projects – their focus on a particular geographical area over a long time period, their employment of security guards and the ability for these people to be selected as model farmers, for example – may have been particularly important in generating the sense of belonging and the notion of NGO as an independent source of development. Unlike the issue of the personal role of Böhm, however, these elements are also found in other projects.

Determining which features are decisive in generating the effects seen in this thesis ultimately requires further research. There are reasons to believe that the case of the MIRDP is not unique. In any case, however often these effects are found in other projects, this thesis has demonstrated that projects which, on the surface, appear to be aligned closely to regimes, and in contexts where regimes have a strong control of development resources, nonetheless have the potential to undermine their dominance. This in itself is an important contribution, as often in the existing literature, aid projects are assumed to be bolstering regimes without deep investigation, because they provide services or because there are cases where regimes have been seen to co-opt projects.

Conclusion

This chapter has summarised the argument of the thesis and has returned to the conceptual framework to identify the ways in which it needed to be refined in the light of

the empirical material. In the conceptual framework I had argued that, based on the existing literature, development projects were understood to be likely to strengthen regime political dominance when they construct infrastructure and buildings for regimes; when these regimes have strong control of development agencies' resources; and when projects align their activities and communications with regimes, using development language which emphasises the role of outsiders in bringing development to the people. However, the case of the MIRDP demonstrated that this was insufficient. It showed that a project which was strongly aligned with the regime, in a context where that regime had a high level of control over development resources, could nonetheless undermine the regime's political dominance.

In returning to and refining the conceptual framework, I argued that the key dynamic underpinning this effect was that MfM had become understood locally as distinct from and superior to the regime – as 'above the government'. There were four principal elements underpinning this: firstly the sheer scale of the MIRDP's development operations, which were much larger than those of the local government; secondly, the way that MfM staff including Karlheinz Böhm presented the NGO as distinct from the regime, for example through visits and narrative tropes, and the way these were received locally; thirdly, the material independence of former staff and beneficiaries, which made them more willing to deploy narratives of MfM as superior to the regime; and fourthly, the fact that officials did not appear to recognise that the project posed a significant threat to regime political dominance until late on in implementation.

Finally, I considered the extent to which the findings here might be replicated in other projects. I suggested that many development projects likely undermine regime

dominance, especially where regimes have less control of development resources and where agencies are less aligned with regimes. The interesting question is whether this may also apply to other projects which are aligned with regimes in contexts where these regimes are strong. I argued that there will likely be other projects like this. In particular, I addressed the notion that the particular role of Böhm makes this case unique. I used an example of another project in Amhara region by the NGO World Vision, where there was no charismatic leader like Böhm but where the dynamics appeared to be very similar. This suggests that there may well be other projects which have similar effects.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In a context where authoritarianism is spreading and deepening across many parts of the world, this thesis sought to develop understanding about how international development aid might be contributing to this concerning trend. The existing literature is often vague about exactly how aid is understood to be supporting authoritarian rule. With this in mind, the thesis focused attention on the causal mechanisms underpinning this relationship. As the effects of development initiatives are not limited to the time of their implementation, it also incorporated a specific focus on their long-term consequences. These strategic choices were captured in the research question: *Through what mechanisms can international development projects influence authoritarian regimes' political dominance over the long term?*

In order to answer this question, I developed a conceptual framework, based on the existing literature, which identified regimes' strategies for building and maintaining political dominance, and put forward mechanisms through which international development projects were understood to affect the way these strategies unfold. I suggested that regimes rely on three main strategies to maintain their dominance: violent coercion, using resources as incentives, and legitimating narratives. I then theorised that development projects could have effects on these strategies through three mechanisms. Firstly, they *build structures* such as roads, railways, schools, hospitals, and water points which can increase states' reach across their territory. In authoritarian regimes, these structures can facilitate regimes' ability to repress opposition, distribute resources to allies

and disseminate legitimating narratives. Such structures can also legitimate regimes if they improve their image, through their associations with modernity and development. Secondly, projects *distribute resources* which can be captured by regimes and integrated into strategies of co-optation or coercive distribution (Albertus et al., 2018). Thirdly, development agencies need to *legitimate their own activities* with local populations. The practices they use to do this include strategic alignment (aligning activities and communications with regimes) and use of developmentalist narratives, which legitimate the role of outsiders in bringing development to the people. These practices, I suggested, can also legitimate regimes as they position the regime as having authority and bringing development.

In order to improve the conceptual framework, I then exposed it to an empirical case of a development project. I selected a 'most likely case' of a development project which was expected to strengthen regime political dominance, firstly because I suspected that the existing literature likely overestimated the extent to which aid strengthens authoritarian regimes. If, even in a most likely case, a development project undermined a regime's political dominance, this would indicate the need for a significant rethink of wider claims in the literature. Secondly, a most likely case design allowed for the thesis to focus on a single case study, which allowed sufficient space for the perspectives and understandings of residents of the project area, whilst maintaining a good level of inferential value.

In gathering empirical data, I sought to foreground the views of people who had lived through the project, expressed as far as possible in their own words, and triangulated these with archival documents which provided insights into how the project was viewed

by both MfM staff and officials in local government. In approaching interviewees, as far as possible I attempted to avoid positioning myself as the expert outsider, for example by walking around the district, and by allowing interviews to flow relatively freely. This was a way of encouraging interviewees to put forward their views about the project confidently. I also deliberately sought out research participants who were not so well connected locally to ensure I could gather their perspectives. Nonetheless my sample of interviewees was likely not fully representative as I spoke to proportionally more better-off and better-connected individuals. This represented a limitation on the thesis as it may have skewed my findings towards the views of better-off individuals locally. However, the perspectives and understandings of these individuals were important and influential in the district.

The case itself was a puzzle. According to the conceptual framework, the Merhabete Integrated Rural Development Project should have strengthened regime political dominance because it constructed a large amount of infrastructure which was expected to extend the EPRDF regime's reach and improve its image; because it was implemented in Ethiopia, where the regime was understood to have significant control over development resources and was known for channelling these towards its own priorities; and because the implementing NGO, Menschen für Menschen, strongly aligned its work with the regime, presenting a public image of close collaboration and avoiding any efforts to advocate for human rights or democracy.

Despite this, I found that the project significantly undermined regime political dominance. Although its built structures did enhance regime reach, it significantly undermined the regime's legitimating narrative of delivering development. It became established in the popular imagination as 'above the government': a superior source of

development and an image of what a good *mengist* (government or state) might have looked like, which made the regime itself look ineffectual by comparison. This had tangible political consequences for the regime, with some people suggesting they wanted to vote for the NGO's head Karlheinz Böhm in the 2005 elections. Even a decade after closure, the project provided ammunition to critics of the regime and the political opposition, as it could be cited as an example of what the regime should have done and had failed to do for the district.

The next section of this concluding chapter draws on the previous chapter to explain the puzzle, and in the process defines the core contribution of this thesis to the understanding of the relationship between development projects and authoritarian regimes' political dominance. Following this, I outline contributions the thesis makes to other literatures, and conclude with some broader reflections on the thesis's implications for research and policy.

Understanding the long-term effects of development projects on authoritarian political dominance

The research question asked what mechanisms link international development projects to authoritarian regimes' political dominance over the long term. In Chapter 8, I provided a detailed answer to this question which is summarised here. The thesis provides a set of refined mechanisms through which development projects are understood to influence authoritarian political dominance. Firstly, in terms of *building structures*, the thesis shows that through building roads, school blocks, clinics and a hospital, projects can enhance state reach and also extend regimes' ability to reach into rural communities. Roads allow

officials to visit communities more easily, while schools and clinics allow dissemination of regime narratives. Additionally, the structures built for development agencies' own purposes can play a particularly important role in their effects on regime reach. In the case of the MIRDP they provided the regime with a set of local sub-district or village offices, which had previously been project field offices. These effects were anticipated in the conceptual framework, but they are nonetheless relatively rarely found in the literature on aid and authoritarianism. An important contribution of this thesis is therefore to establish this mechanism both theoretically and empirically.

Secondly, in terms of *distributing resources*, the thesis showed that, as expected, projects' political effects are dependent on whether regimes succeed in capturing their resources; but regimes may have less control over these than many other studies suggest. It highlighted the importance of staff salaries, which are not well studied and which regimes seldom seek to control. It also highlighted how labour-intensive targeting practices can lead regimes to struggle to control resource distribution, especially when the scale of development agencies' work is very large. Finally and importantly, it stressed the importance of tracking the long-term consequences of resource distribution practices, as these can lead to the formation of significant social groups who may oppose (or potentially support) the regime. These groups can become particularly significant if they coexist with narratives which stress distinction between development agencies and regimes.

Thirdly, in terms of projects' *legitimation practices*, the thesis showed that strategic alignment and use of developmentalist narratives are not necessarily the key elements which determine whether a project will or will not strengthen a regime's political

dominance. MfM staff practiced strategic alignment and used developmentalist narratives and still undermined regime dominance. Instead, the more important question is whether a development agency is constructed as distinct from and potentially superior to a regime in its ability to deliver development, and crucially, whether this perception resonates with and becomes commonly expressed in a particular context.

In the case of the MIRDP, this was done through various legitimation practices, including the visits of Karlheinz Böhm which presented him as a senior leader with parallels to traditional authority figures in Amhara region, but also with vital differences in terms of his informality and the projection of his closeness to the poor. MfM staff also legitimated the NGO's role by constructing it as distinct from the regime through narrative; they situated the regime as insufficiently committed to development and too focused on politics, in contrast to the NGO which focused 'purely' on development. This understanding significantly influenced perceptions of structures built by the project such as school blocks and clinics, which although they were used by the regime at the time of my visits, were widely associated with MfM and not the regime. The fact that these narratives resonated in the district had a lot to do with the presence of many former staff who had internalised these ways of thinking and who were influential in the area a decade after project closure. This illustrates the connections between the mechanisms.

The thesis presents these mechanisms as a contribution to the understanding of how projects may strengthen or undermine authoritarian regimes' political dominance over the long term. As a single case study, the thesis cannot develop scope conditions for the circumstances in which its effects may be found in other cases. Its value is to illuminate the detailed 'cogs and wheels' (Hedström and Ylikoski, 2010) through which projects and

regime dominance were linked in one case, in order that other researchers may recognise similar processes in other cases.

As suggested in the previous chapter, however, there are grounds for believing that the effects seen in this thesis can be found in other projects. Many of the features found to be important in this case – the relative size of the project in comparison with the local government budget, its labour-intensive targeting practices, development agencies' autonomy in terms of hiring staff, and narratives about governments' lack of commitment to development – are widely found in other cases also. While the specific role of Böhm is less commonly found elsewhere, the case of World Vision in Antsokia presented in chapter 8 suggests that this was not necessarily decisive.

Besides the question of whether the effects seen here will be specifically replicated elsewhere, the thesis has wider implications for research on aid and authoritarianism. Four implications in particular stand out. The first is that the MIRDP makes a strong case to suggest that all development projects have political consequences. While there is a large literature which argues that development is inherently political, there remains a lingering perception in some quarters that at least some aid can succeed in being politically neutral. Whilst Western bilateral donors have moved away from their previous insistence on their political neutrality, multilaterals are still bound by this notion; also, China maintains that it practices non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, and sees its aid as governed by this principle (Zhaohui, 2022). Yet both the conceptual and empirical material developed in this thesis suggest that even when agencies attempt not to interfere in domestic politics (as MfM did), they cannot fail to have political consequences of some kind simply by building structures, providing resources to

individuals and groups, and legitimating their work. Importantly, however, these consequences may include bolstering regimes, weakening them, or a combination of both.

Following on from this, the second implication of the thesis for research on aid and authoritarianism is that the long-term effects of aid on authoritarian rule are complex and difficult to determine. The case shows that projects have the potential to strengthen regimes in some aspects while weakening them in others. The MIRDP extended regime reach while undermining regime legitimating narratives. It also shows that regimes which appear to be fully in control of donor and NGO resources, such as the EPRDF in Ethiopia, may in fact not have as complete a control as some studies suggest (see for example Lavers, 2024; Terrefe, 2022; Chinigò, 2022; Fantini and Puddu, 2016). It highlights the importance of certain resource flows which have previously been neglected, in particular staff salaries, which have potential for significant long-term effects on regime dominance.

In a similar vein, the thesis demonstrates that development agencies which align with regimes may not necessarily strengthen their political dominance. Of all the NGOs in Ethiopia, MfM was one of the very closest to the regime, yet it still undermined its legitimating narratives in Merhabete. This is an important conclusion because it implies that other forms of aid that are strongly aligned with authoritarian regimes may not strengthen them. For example, Chinese aid is usually aligned with the priorities of incumbent governments and is seen by some as promoting autocracy. It seems plausible, however, that it may undermine some regimes, for example if China is identified by people as a superior source of development to the regime. This also underlines the importance

of the methods used in this thesis to uncover projects' consequences, which I return to below.

A third implication of the thesis for this area of research is that it is too simplistic to characterise the political effects of aid on authoritarian regimes along a one-dimensional scale where they either promote democracy or bolster authoritarianism (or have no effect). The literature reviewed in chapter 3 mostly concentrates either on how aid might strengthen democracy (Gisselquist et al., 2021; Resnick and van de Walle, 2013), or how it might reinforce authoritarian rule (Cheeseman and Desrosiers, 2023; Hagmann and Reyntjens, 2016). This case shows how projects can weaken authoritarian political dominance without necessarily supporting democracy. The MIRDP did not increase support for freer debate, or increased transparency and accountability. The threat that the project posed to the EPRDF regime was not that it proposed new ideas of the state, but that it exemplified a pre-existing idea of a developmental *mengist* better than the regime did itself.

This finding is also relevant for recent debates on the role of NGOs in authoritarian regimes. Until recently a broad consensus was that whilst claims-making, advocacy NGOs presented a political threat to regimes, service-providing NGOs were likely to be neutral in their effects, or even to offer support to regimes by improving service delivery or becoming coopted (Toepler et al., 2020; Heiss, 2019). However, a few recent studies have made the argument that service delivery NGOs can foster democratization, for example through providing spaces for freer public debate or educating people about their basic rights (Moldavanova et al., 2023; Herrold and AbouAssi, 2023). The case of the MIRDP does not offer support to this view. The project likely strengthened support for the

opposition during the 2005 elections, but this was linked not so much to a desire for freer debate or greater accountability, as for a government which would be more effective at delivering development. Those who wanted to vote for 'Karl' were perhaps enticed by the vision of a *mengist* which was exclusively focused on development, and did not demand taxes, lock up dissidents or recruit for the military. But generally speaking, the MIRDP did not fundamentally change the way people in Merhabete thought about authority. A core contribution of the case is therefore that it shows how an NGO project can undermine an authoritarian regime's political dominance without necessarily supporting democratization.

Fourthly and finally, the thesis implies that authoritarian regimes which ground their legitimacy on delivering development have a certain element of vulnerability politically. If regimes seek to justify their rule through their ability to deliver development, but people see that that development work is carried out mainly by external actors, regimes run the risk of losing legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. Whether this happens is likely to depend on whether the external agency is seen as an adjunct of the regime or as distinct and potentially superior to it. As set out in the previous chapter, this in turn is related to how the agency is presented by its own staff and how these representations are received and understood. This finding aligns with studies which argue that even powerful and well-established authoritarian regimes retain weak spots and vulnerabilities (see for example Teti et al., 2018).

To summarise, the thesis presents an intriguing case of a development project which appeared likely to strengthen an incumbent regime but which in fact weakened its dominance long after the project itself had closed. Through its detailed analysis of the

causal mechanisms through which it achieved these effects, the thesis adds significantly to contemporary understandings of the relations between aid, NGOs and authoritarianism. However, its contribution is not limited to these debates; further contributions are explored in the next section.

Broader contributions of the thesis

Beyond its specific contribution to literatures on aid, NGOs and authoritarianism, the thesis makes a number of wider contributions. Firstly, the thesis is the first book-length academic study of the work of Menschen für Menschen in Ethiopia. The NGO is an important part of the story of international development efforts in Ethiopia under EPRDF, due to its celebration by the regime. It also represents an important element of the history of German international development efforts from the 1980s through to the 2000s, due to the widely-known fundraising efforts of Karlheinz Böhm, but it has so far been relatively little studied. The archives that I drew on for this study, both in Merhabete *wereda* and in the Addis Ababa offices of MfM, have not to my knowledge featured in previous published academic work. The oral history interviews collected are also a resource which could potentially be used for future historians of Ethiopia or of international development in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The thesis therefore offers a contribution to the discipline of history, as well as those of political science and development studies.

Secondly, the thesis makes a contribution to literatures on NGOs, foreign aid and government legitimacy. As mentioned in chapter 3, recent contributions in this field have mostly argued that NGO- and donor-funded development assistance has no effect or small positive effects on government legitimacy (Blair and Roessler, 2021; Baldwin and

Winters, 2020; Mcloughlin, 2019; Dietrich et al., 2018; Brass, 2016). Some studies have specifically argued that such assistance may legitimate authoritarian regimes (Springman, 2022; Toepler et al., 2020; Lorch and Bunk, 2017). This thesis provides an example of the opposite, a case where a development project undermined the legitimating narratives of an incumbent government. However, it would be a mistake to see this as suggesting a return to previous arguments in this literature, which suggested that, in principle, all development aid threatened government legitimacy because it undermined the 'fiscal contract' between citizens and the state. Other case studies have suggested that in some contexts, NGOs and development agencies may be understood as part of the *de facto* operational apparatus of the state, and this thesis does not contradict this. What the thesis does demonstrate is that understanding the implications of foreign donor and NGO projects on government legitimacy is complex and depends on understanding how people conceptualise the respective roles of government and development agencies, which can vary significantly from one context to another.

In particular, the thesis contributes to debates about who citizens credit for the goods and services that donors and NGOs provide, and under what conditions governments can claim credit for these – a central concern of this literature (Blair and Winters, 2020: 126). A number of recent studies have suggested that governments can succeed in claiming credit for the work of NGOs and donors (Springman, 2022; Blair and Roessler, 2021; Baldwin and Winters, 2023; Dietrich et al., 2018; Brass, 2016). This thesis points the way towards a nuanced understanding of how people give, or refuse to give, credit to governments for the work of NGOs and donors. In particular, it suggests that the key question in determining whether people credit governments for the work of development

agencies is whether these agencies are understood as adjuncts of the state or as distinct and potentially superior to governments.

The thesis also makes suggestions for what might underpin this process. Importantly, it suggests that whether people credit governments or agencies is not a simple function of whether the agency in question is from a democratic or authoritarian state, or whether aid is routed through government or NGOs. It depends on how a project is constructed by its staff and how these constructions are received locally, including over a long time period. This lends weight to existing arguments about the importance of grappling with local understandings of legitimacy in particular contexts (see Wenner, 2021; McLoughlin, 2024). It also indicates the limitations of 'informational experiments' which investigate the effects of providing one-off information to research participants about who funded a particular development initiative, and emphasises the value of understanding the construction of legitimacy over the long-term (an argument also made by Springman, 2022).

This leads me on to the methodological contribution of the thesis. The approach, with its emphasis on understanding the long-term political legacy of a development project through the perspectives of citizens, is novel in the literature on aid and authoritarianism and also rare within the wider literature on development. The closest comparisons to the approach adopted in this thesis are found within anthropology and history, but such accounts rarely attempt to relate their findings to specific debates within political science and development studies. Considered alongside other scholarly work in these disciplines, the methodological approach adopted has added 'richness, texture, and detail' (Ortner, 1995) to key debates reviewed above, such as on aid and authoritarianism and aid and

government legitimacy. The two key dimensions it has added are, firstly, in-depth listening to the perspectives of citizens, with a view towards understanding how they saw the effects of a development project; and secondly, a long-term perspective, recognising that effects of projects reverberate for many years after they close.

The research re-emphasises the value of spending time talking at length to the people whom aid and development projects are intended to benefit – not simply to collect their responses to questionnaires, but seeking to understand the world as they see it. Whilst this is hardly a new finding, the time researchers can dedicate to collecting data is increasingly limited, and sometimes the ways in which data is collected can prevent meaningful connection between researcher and research participants.

The method has revealed effects of a development project which have so far not been found through other studies. It revealed, for example, that the EPRDF regime control of development resources was not complete in the case of the MIRDP, which ran against a consensus in the existing literature. It also showed that a project which was closely aligned with the regime could nonetheless undermine that regime's dominance, which again had not been identified by previous studies. This demonstrates the value of the approach and its contribution to wider debates.

Conclusion and implications

This thesis demonstrates the potential for development projects to have far reaching political consequences, but also shows how those consequences are complex and often surprising. It illuminates how, through everyday actions that almost all projects do – building structures, hiring staff, distributing resources, legitimating actions – they can

significantly influence the relationships between citizens and governments in countries where they operate.

The previous sections have already touched on some key implications for future research. They have argued for the importance of research which draws on the perspectives and understandings of those people who aid programmes are intended to support. They have also emphasised the value of research which seeks to uncover the causal mechanisms which underpin the relationships between aid and authoritarianism. There would be value in further studies of the political consequences and legacies of development schemes, such as mega-infrastructure projects, large-scale climate finance, and humanitarian aid, as well as smaller initiatives such as provision of particular forms of expertise. There would also be value in comparative research looking at the relative effects of different projects. The theoretical framework developed in this thesis could form a basis on which such research might build.

The thesis has also identified under-researched topics which could be fruitful to explore in greater depth. For example, the idea of development as apolitical had quite different political consequences in this thesis compared to in Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994). Ferguson argued that development agencies' insistence that they are technical, not political, hides the fact that they bolster incumbent regimes, extending their reach and their bureaucratic and authoritarian practices into rural areas. Whilst this thesis has also found that the MIRDP expanded state reach, this chapter has provided a very different account of the effects of describing development as apolitical. People in Merhabete were attracted by the idea that they could become developed, and enjoy better lives, without the responsibilities of engaging in politics, for example supporting the regime and

denigrating its critics. The mantra of development as apolitical was damaging to the regime as it framed the actions of officials as less pure than those of MfM staff, tarnishing its claim to be the source of development. It would be interesting to pursue the extent to which this idea of development as apolitical has or has not taken hold in other local contexts.

The role of employees of development agencies in domestic politics in aid-recipient countries is also worth further study. This thesis has shown how these people played a critical role in promoting ideas around associating development with outside actors, rather than the regime. The extent to which employees of development agencies might play such a role at a national level would be an interesting question to pursue.

For policy makers and programme designers in donor agencies, NGOs, and foreign ministries, the overarching implication is the importance of understanding political consequences and legacies of their schemes and initiatives. The political consequences of the MIRDP were hidden. Few, even in the recipient government, were really aware of them until late on in implementation. This illustrates that development agency staff will not discover the political consequences of their projects unless they specifically look for them. This requires going beyond recognising that 'development is a fundamentally political process,' or looking to develop 'more politically-informed approaches' (Laws and Marquette, 2018: 2). Even though there have been many initiatives over the past 10-15 years to encourage development agencies to put a greater focus on politics, donors and NGOs still review the political economy of countries where they operate as if they themselves were sitting outside of the analysis. Understanding the political consequences of development schemes is not simply a matter of understanding the political barriers to

achieving ‘development results’. It means taking on the realisation that everything development agencies do will likely have some kind of political consequence locally.

Dinesh Paudel’s fascinating study linking the Maoist uprising in Nepal to internationally-funded development aid projects takes the view that ‘the political outcomes of development are always complex and often unpredictable’ (Paudel, 2016: 1028). This is a frustrating message for policy makers, but it is true that political consequences of development projects are difficult to predict and often contingent on local factors. In this sense, the only advice that can be given is to recognise that development projects will have political consequences, to be aware that these will likely manifest themselves in the ways projects provide funding, construct buildings and legitimate their work, and to attempt to track them to the extent possible. Whilst tracking political consequences is difficult, it can be facilitated through a thorough understanding of the ‘delivery chain’ through which project resources are passed and, importantly, listening to ordinary citizens, including those who are intended to benefit from support.

One way in which agencies could potentially track political effects of their programmes is through evaluation. In recent years there has been a growing discussion about evaluating unintended consequences of development projects and programmes (Koch and Rooden, 2024; Koch, 2023; Oliver et al., 2019; Koch and Schulpen, 2018; Bamberger et al., 2016; Jabeen, 2016). The existing literature has generated some interesting typologies for the kinds of effect that projects may have. Dirk-Jan Koch, for example, has produced a comprehensive typology of unintended effects in a recent book (Koch, 2023). His chapter on ‘governance effects’ considers three sub-types, ‘corruption effects’, ‘democracy effects’ and ‘tax effects’ (pp. 142-57). The section on ‘democracy effects’

considers how aid can bolster authoritarianism but does not review how projects might undermine regimes. This thesis and its conceptual framework provide a basis for more nuanced future evaluation of projects' political consequences. In addition, the thesis's approach to reviewing what development projects *do*, in building structures, distributing resources, and legitimating their work, provides a fresh way to consider the effects projects have outside of their abstract 'outcomes of interest'. This approach could be useful for evaluators and may also reveal other consequences of projects beyond those reviewed in this thesis, such as wider effects on the economy or environment.

The final question to consider as a policy implication of the thesis is whether and in what circumstances donors should provide aid in authoritarian regimes. The thesis has demonstrated that this is not a straightforward question. Whilst some activists and scholars would prefer donors and INGOs to stop providing any kind of aid in authoritarian states, it is clear that aid does not necessarily always bolster regimes. The fact that aid does not automatically entrench regimes indicates that there is scope to continue with some forms of support in some contexts. Also, it is worth noting that the people I spoke to in Merhabete did not want aid to stop; they clearly wanted MfM to return to the area. They valued the infrastructure built, the employment opportunities provided, and the care and concern of MfM staff including Karlheinz Böhm. This raises the question of whether external researchers have the right to suggest they are wrong.

Alongside existing work on the 'donor dilemma' (Dasandi and Erez, 2019), this thesis has some implications for policy makers wanting to continue to provide aid in authoritarian contexts whilst avoiding entrenching regimes. Some forms of aid are particularly vulnerable to capture. Clearly, there are major risks in passing money through

government systems in these contexts, and there have also been persuasive arguments about the dangers of cooperation with security forces. This thesis suggests agencies should also be cautious about funding construction of government buildings including schools and hospitals, as well as supporting local government, as these may strengthen regimes' reach. Programmes where beneficiaries can be easily identified and listed are vulnerable to regimes vetting these lists, enrolling the programme in strategies of coercive distribution. Agencies should also be wary of projects being used to bolster regime legitimating narratives, especially where these are focused on development. Large infrastructure projects are perhaps most vulnerable to this, although as demonstrated here, this also depends on whether donor agencies are understood as an extension of the state or as something distinct.

Whether NGOs should continue development projects in authoritarian regimes is perhaps even more tricky. In some ways, this thesis situates NGOs operating in authoritarian regimes in the difficult position of having to choose between either bolstering regimes by positioning their own work as subsumed under government strategies, on the one hand, or developing their reputations with local populations as patrimonial leaders like Karlheinz Böhm, with perhaps uncomfortable quasi-colonial overtones, on the other. Neither approach is attractive, so NGOs that wish to continue supporting the less privileged will have to navigate ways of providing support without resorting to either pitfall, difficult though this will be. The thesis also does not offer much comfort to those who hope that NGO service provision in authoritarian regimes will promote democracy (Moldavanova et al., 2023). Perhaps service delivery NGOs may be able to promote democratic values but, on the evidence of this thesis, this is unlikely to follow simply from

service provision. It would need to be something that is lived by staff in their daily interactions with citizens. Ultimately, I believe that it is worth NGOs and development agencies looking for ways of continuing to operate in these difficult contexts. The impulse to care for and support people in difficulty is one that should be nurtured, not crushed – though we should be aware of the potential for well-intentioned help to do more harm than good.

As a final thought, does this thesis still have relevance in a world where development aid is apparently on the way out? Following the end of USAID in early 2025 and major reductions to foreign aid from various bilateral donors, some commentators are suggesting that we are seeing 'the end of development' (see Tooze, 2025). It is possible that some forms of large-scale development aid will phase out over the coming years, such as long-term delivery of health and education services by international donors and NGOs. But many forms of aid will stay, including humanitarian aid, support for climate mitigation and adaptation, and internationally-financed infrastructure construction. Rising powers such as China, India and Middle Eastern countries also seem set on providing forms of international economic support.

Will we use the word 'development' to describe this support? Perhaps not. But this thesis demonstrates the power of the development idea that will likely persist even if it is given another name. Just as historical studies emphasised how African elites took on colonisers' ideas of development and used them to argue against colonial rule (Cooper, 1996), this study also shows how the desire for a better life for oneself and one's children is a powerful, and sometimes unpredictable, political force. People will continue to be attracted by those who they believe will offer them such a better life, and this is a force

that has the potential either to bolster governments – authoritarian or democratic – or to topple them.

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