

**Water, infrastructures and *leamat* (development) in Ethiopia.  
State formation and transboundary implications**

Monday, 19<sup>th</sup> June 2017

IHE Institute for Water Education, Delft (Room A2b).

Convened by Emanuele Fantini,  
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Is high modernism striking back in Ethiopia? In the last years, under the auspices of the developmental state, the Ethiopian government has embarked in an ambitious program of hydropower and irrigation development to sustain its Growth and Transformation Plans and to achieve the middle income status by 2025. Large scale irrigation projects and big dams are simultaneously built in different river basins, mostly at the periphery – or the “last frontiers” (Markakis 2011) - of the country.

The spirit of *leamat*, the Amharic translation of development, inspires these projects, by conveying the idea of blossoming, greening, and fertility and linking it to “numerical expansion and growth of agricultural wealth with the involvement of bureaucrats” (Berhane-Selassie 2009). Indeed irrigation and hydropower projects represent a key element of the strategy of state building adopted by the Ethiopian government. By referring at their consequences in terms of *state formation* we intend to look at their role in “the historical process, mainly unconscious and contradictory, of conflicts, negotiation and compromises between different groups” (Berman and Lonsdale, 1992) that occurs within - and ultimately shapes - the explicit institutional strategy of state building promoted by the government.

We could also think of these projects in terms of *hydropolis* (Menga 2017), whit the infrastructure – and its public appearance - transcending its physical and geographical place to create new spaces for political action and debate. Some of these spaces, such as in the Nile or in the Omo-Turkana basins, also acquire a transboundary dimension, jeopardising the relations with some riparian countries like Egypt or Kenya, but also opening up new avenues for regional cooperation with others like Sudan.

In their introduction to the Journal of Eastern African Studies’ special issue on [“Frontier transformations: development visions, spaces and processes in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia”](#) Jason Moseley and Elizabeth Watson (2016) find strong continuities between the Ethiopian development plans and the high modernist schemes analysed by James Scott (1998). They retrace the components of Scott’s framework in contemporary Ethiopian large scale development projects: an administrative ordering of nature and society, an attachment to high modernist ideology, an authoritarian state, and a prostrate civil society.

Do we have to conclude that large scale projects in Ethiopia are at risk of failing as the high modernist schemes studied by Scott? Whose failure are we talking about: financial, ecological, technical, scientific, social, or political? What can the recent debate on [the \(re\)turn to big water infrastructure](#) (Crow Miller, Webber, Molle 2017) and on technopolitics add to our understanding of Ethiopia’s large scale development projects? Are big infrastructures coalescing or colliding with Ethnic federalism? How do they reshape power relations between different scales (local, regional, national, international), as well as between different bodies of the Ethiopian government itself? While the Ethiopian government effectively shapes and disciplines the *hydropolis* generated by these projects, are there any interstices where people, researchers, technicians or policy makers engage in debate, challenges mainstream views, or suggest new perspectives?

The workshop aims at promoting an interdisciplinary conversation around these issues between researchers working in different Ethiopian river basins and studying different irrigation or hydropower projects. It will also attempt to identify research and publication projects where such conversation can further unfold, spark debate and contribute to more just and sustainable development.

## Programme

- 8,30 – 9,00 Welcome and Introduction
- 9,00 – 10,30 Emanuele Fantini (IHE Delft), The Beles Sugar Development Project: an old frontier (mobility), a new centre (accumulation) and their margins (social stratification).
- Sabine Planel (Institute de Recherche pour le Développement, Paris), Reframing spaces and polarizing societies. Some elements on the Tendaho project's local impact.
- 10,30 – 11,00 *Coffee break*
- 11,00 – 12,30 Benedikt Kamski (University of Freiburg), Against all reason? The hydro-agricultural exploitation of the lower Omo Valley.
- Edegilign Hailu (Université Paris Nanterre), Exploring state modernism and large dams in Ethiopia: the case of the Gibe III hydroelectric project.
- 12,30 – 13,30 *Lunch*
- 13,30 – 15,00 Filippo Menga (University of Manchester), The GERD and the Ethiopian *hydropolis*.
- Wondwosen Seide (University of Lund), The Nile and the GERD in the Ethiopian media: going against or going towards transboundary cooperation?
- Discussants: Tobias von Lossow (German Institute for International Security and Affairs) and Jean-Nicolas Bach (CEDEJ-Khartoum).
- 15,30 – 17,00 Concluding remarks and discussion of future research and publications

## References

- Berhane-Selassie, T. (2009). Prestige is the argument: ideas of power and development aid in Ethiopia. In Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (Vol. 1, p. 4).
- Berman, B., & Lonsdale, J. (1992). *Unhappy valley: conflict in Kenya & Africa* (Vol. 1). Ohio University Press.
- Crow-Miller, B., Webber, M., & Molle, F. (2017). The (Re) turn to Infrastructure for Water Management?. *Water Alternatives*, 10(2), 195-207.
- Markakis, J. (2011). *Ethiopia: The last two frontiers*. Boydell & Brewer Ltd.
- Menga, F. (2017). *Hydropolis: Reinterpreting the polis in water politics*. *Political Geography*, 60, 100-109.
- Mosley, J., & Watson, E. (2016). Frontier transformations: development visions, spaces and processes in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 10(3), 452-475.
- Scott, J. C. (1998). *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press.