

Strong business–state alliances at the expense of labour rights in Ethiopia’s apparel-exporting industrial parks

Authors:

*Dr Mohammed Seid Ali¹
Mr Solomon Molla Ademe²

Affiliation:

¹ Department of Political Science and International Studies, Bahirdar University, Ethiopia

² Department of Political Science and International Relations, Woldia University, Ethiopia

E-mail:

*mohammedseid1997@gmail.com
mollasol1991@gmail.com

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*corresponding author

Abstract

In the past decade, Ethiopia has demonstrated a strong ideological convention to the East-Asian model of ‘developmental state’, which stands for state-led industrialisation as its underlying industrial policy premise. Nevertheless, the labour rights externalities of this industrial policymaking have been overlooked in the existing academic and practical policy debates. Hence, using qualitative empirical data, the article attempts to address the research gap by analysing why and how Ethiopia’s state-led industrialisation and the corporate behaviours of apparel-exporting firms, as well as their respective global brand buyers, have contributed to the existing poverty wages and repressive practices against the associational rights of local industrial workers at those selected apparel-exporting industrial parks of the country. The maxim of industrialisation with a human face has increasingly become a promising alternative to the neoclassical intellectual view of labour relations following its fundamentals towards achieving a more sustainable industrial development in a given state. In light of this human right imperative, the finding revealed Ethiopia’s state-led industrialisation has firmly embraced strong business–state alliances, thereby curbing the power of local industrial workers. The Ethiopian government employs diverse *de facto* or *de jure* labour control mechanisms across those selected apparel-exporting industrial parks of the country. This is manifested through poverty wages and repressive measures to deny the associational rights of workers. Further, the flawed Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of employing firms and their respective global brands have contributed to the ongoing labour abuses across those selected apparel-exporting firms. Hence, Ethiopia’s industrial policy is expected to navigate

a reasonable balance between facilitating industrial catch-up and ensuring labour standards for more viable and sustainable labour relations.

1. Introduction

The successful track record of rapid industrialisation since 2005 is crucial to the history of late-industrialising Ethiopia. With the low-income economy of Eastern African states, Ethiopia has been remarkable in successfully initiating industrial catch-up to ensure structural socio-economic transformation from a predominantly agrarian economy to a globally-integrated industrial economy (Fantu, 2014). In this regard, the country's ideological commitment towards state-led industrial policy-making and its investment-friendly industrial policy instruments have been remarkable (Oqubay, 2019). Also, the country has invested heavily in industrial infrastructures and human resource developments and offered tax incentives to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) in the apparel industry as a priority sector. Consequently, the country has recently become among the preferred destinations for multinational apparel manufacturers and brands (Barrett & Baumann-Pauly, 2019:1). In 2017, it was ranked as first recipient of those labour-intensive foreign apparel firms in East Africa and the second in Africa (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2018).

Yet, the country's labour rights context has been largely overlooked in the history of its industrial policy-making. In this regard, leading researchers such as Oya and Schafer (2019), Hardy and Hague (2019), and Mitta (2019) highlighted the challenges of the labour sector in late-industrialising Ethiopia. Nevertheless, none of them sufficiently explained the major challenges of Ethiopia's collective labour relations from the vantage points of the country's development ideology and its labour rights institutions, employers, and brands. Besides, none of them did address the exceptional contexts and limitations of Ethiopia's state-led industrialisation and their implications on the voices of local industrial workers in the country's industrial parks (IPs).

Towards filling this underlying research gap, this article, therefore, aims to examine the suppressive labour practices against the associational labour rights (freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, and the right to conduct labour strikes) of workers in Ethiopia's state-led industrialisation since 2005. It also analyses various labour-control mechanisms employed by both the Ethiopian government and multinational apparel manufacturers in the country's IPs to silence the voices of local industrial workers. To this effect, as will be explained in the methodology section, exploratory and explanatory research designs have been integrated under the general qualitative methodological framework.

2. Conceptual notes and demystifying existing debates

The term 'collective labour relations' refers to the relationship between employers (employers' associations) and employees (trade unions) on matters of collective interest.

Through unionisation, workers can pressure the owners of capital, who otherwise have more bargaining power (Dunning, 1998:162; Mehari, 2015:44). Recognising that many workers have weak bargaining power and are vulnerable, international human and labour rights legislations prioritise workers' collective rights over the rights of employers. Freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining and industrial actions are the core components of collective labour relations.

To begin with, freedom of association is defined in two different ways. First, freedom of association is described as an intrinsic moral value and an inherent human entitlement of workers beyond the bounds of the instrumentality of policy explanations. As such, workers, like other human beings, are born with the freedom of acquiring information, choice, and the right to organise themselves (Universal Declaration on Human Rights, 1948:art 20(1); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966:art 22; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966; Mehari, 2015:42). Second, freedom of association can also be defined as a means to improve the bargaining powers of industrial workers (International Labour Organization [ILO], 1996, 1998). This study applies both definitions to contextualise the right of workers to organise themselves around collective concerns as they relate to their working conditions and the right to decent and fair wages from their employers.

Similarly, collective bargaining can be defined as a process of a bilateral compromise between employer and employee representatives (Schregle, 1992:435; Gernigon, Otero & Guido, 1998:35). It may also refer to a tripartite discussion among employer and employee representatives, together with the national government, to reach mutually agreed terms and conditions of employment. In short, collective bargaining is when employers and employees are left on their own to deliberate on the basic terms of their employment relations through a 'give and take' mode of operation (ILO, 2008:para 12; Mehari, 2015). Given the importance of 'give and take', collective bargaining transcends the boundaries of merely regulating the terms and conditions of employment. Instead, it, comprises communication, mutual trust, management, and leadership in the sector.

Finally, labour disputes between workers and employers or between a trade union and an employer's association are common across industrial traditions and ideologies. These disputes usually arise from applying the principles, collective settlements, work guidelines, employment deals, and disagreements that emerge during collective bargaining. Labour disputes may escalate to various forms of strikes by the employees. From a labour rights perspective, labour strikes are an essential part of freedom of association, without which workers and unions lack the strength to defend their legitimate interests against powerful capital (Gernigon, Otero & Guido, 1998). Hence, employees' collective actions are intended to induce their employers to accept their legitimate industrial demands (Proclamation No.1156/2019:art 137(5)). To pressure their employers, workers can engage in various kinds of actions such as slowdowns and temporary work stoppages.

Despite the growing commitment of international human and labour rights instruments towards promoting workers' voices worldwide, various scholars and practitioners from different perspectives still maintain conflicting explanations on the matter.

In this regard, there are two contending perspectives as the neoclassical and human rights schools of thought. Advocates of neoclassical labour economics usually define industrial employees as being rational, self-interested, and utility-maximising agents. Similarly, they characterise employers (owners of capital) as profit-maximising actors. The neoclassical perspective regards the labour market as perfectly competitive and the key driver of labour relations (Chidi & Okpala, 2012:263-265). Consequently, proponents of this approach conceptualise industrial labour relations as a mutually advantageous transaction between self-interested agents (individual employers and employees) in a freely operating market economy.

Based on the above neoclassical premises, one can plausibly infer that labour relation is a purely economic and contractual issue that shall entirely be left to the private dealings of employers and employees. Hence, any action to legally institutionalise the relations between employers and employees is tantamount to disturbing the free and direct economic relations between an employee and employer (Wachter, 2004; Budd & Bhawe, 2008:3-4). In addition, the neoclassical perspective views collective labour rights policies as acts of putting unnecessary pressure on employers and investments (Rose, 2008). As a result, it may be considered a threat to the influx of FDI, which, in turn, aggravates unemployment and other macroeconomic pressures on national economies.

In the context of economic globalisation, the questions of how multinational companies could incorporate, control, and exploit labour into their production process have been very challenging. Significant pieces of global value chain (GVC)¹ literature based on the neoclassical maxim treats labour as a passive agent at the dictate of capital's search for a cheap and less-organised workforce (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011:221). The neoclassical view advocates strongly against any form of labour activism for collective bargaining since they regard such action as a threat to the multinational companies' profit margin (Cumbers, Nativel & Routledge, 2008:370). Hence, advocates of the neoclassical maxim strongly contest all forms of collective bargaining, particularly labour strikes, as unlawful acts to disrupt the fluid production process in the global value chain.

Since the 1970s, there has been a deliberate reconfiguration by global firms of their production locations from rich economies to the low-cost developing countries of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Chang, 2009; Staritz & Whitfield, 2019). The motives of global manufacturers to shift their production location may not be explained only from a low-wage perspective. Instead, they want to exploit the flexible labour practices of emerging destination countries willing to downsize local industrial workers' collective voices (Oya & Schaefer, 2019) to attract FDI to maximise their export earnings and alleviate the foreign exchange shortage (Oqubay, 2019). This implies that there is a policy convergence between the governments of destination countries and multinational companies. Hence,

1 The Global Value Chain (GVC) is increasingly becoming a dominant term which refers to the global production and transaction network in the current context of economic globalisation. From the perspective of multinational apparel industries, the global apparel value chains imply that global brands (buyers) significantly influence, if not control, the decisions of manufacturers in terms of quality, speed of delivery, and price, even though they often do not participate directly in the production process (Gereffi & Frederick, 2010).

as Hardy and Hague (2019:10) rightly explained, the violations of associational rights must therefore be analyzed from the policy rationales of both global manufacturers and national governments.

Nevertheless, the neoclassical explanations for deregulated, less-organised, and less-unionised industrial labour relations cannot sufficiently address questions of peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable industrial development. First, this reductionist intellectual view treats human labour as a mere object of economic transaction. This view stands against the intrinsic moral value of employees as human beings who are free, rational, and dignified actors (Coma, 2000; Kaufman, 2005). Second, the neoclassical argument for freedom of contract between capital and labour as if they have equal economic bargaining power would not bring about mutually acceptable sustainable industrial relations (Rawls, 1993; Nussbaum, 1997; Sen, 2005; Compa, 2008). Global corporations have immense bargaining power vis-à-vis workers if the latter remains unorganised (Mehari, 2015:21). Therefore, stable and predictable rules governing employer-employee relations are critical for sustainable industrial development.

As a result, many scholars advocating the human rights imperative have called for an alternative understanding of labour agencies, particularly in the current age of economic globalisation, which is characterised by the GVC (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Proponents of the human rights scholarship have argued that the right of workers to collective bargaining is an integral part of the human rights of workers. For them, workers' freedom of association and their rights to collective bargaining are beyond the rationality of free market logic (Nussbaum, 1997; Sen, 2000). The central claim of the human rights argument is that workers should be treated as active agents in global production networks. As such, they can intervene at different geographical scales and points of the network to defend their interests. Considering the unequal bargaining power between labour and capital, industrial action is the only means they have at their disposal to force the owners of capital to bargain with labour (Dunning, 1998:162). It is also argued that ensuring the workers' bargaining power is indispensable to mutual trust and inclusive, peaceful, productive, and sustainable industrial labour relations (ILO, 2008; Action, Collaboration and Transformation, 2020:6).

First, the human rights explanations of collective labour rights reflect the premises of the social upgrading argument. The social upgrading argument defines workers' associational rights as a counterbalance to the policy imperative of economic upgrading (Gereffi & Frederick, 2010). It further claims that employers' commitment to collective bargaining would give workers an incentive to cooperate with organisational changes in the knowledge that the industrial profits will be fairly distributed between the employer and employees (Gereffi & Luo, 2014). Consequently, social upgrading can enhance communication, reduce staff turnover, and improve productivity.

Second, the human rights arguments for collective labour rights sufficiently reflect various historical accounts explaining the enduring legacies of suppressive labour control regimes across the ideological divide (Hardy & Hague, 2019:1; Oya & Schaefer, 2019). Hence, workers have no alternative except to resort to industrial actions to advance their

interests for living wages and better working conditions at the workplace. To this effect, it is argued that the human rights perspective rightfully informs national governments, employing firms, and global brands to coordinate their efforts towards the promotion and protection of workers' rights and to guarantee fair wages and better working conditions as foundations for inclusive and durable industrial relations.

Third, the human rights approach to collective labour relations transcends the mere legalisation of such labour relations. As such, it also implies the general social commitment and moral responsibility of stakeholders, particularly employing firms and their respective global brand buyers, to ensure socially accepted principles of labour justice and other widely recognised labour and human rights standards. This essentially complements CSR principles for employers, which prescribe that employing firms and their respective global brand buyers, beyond their conventional drive to race to the bottom, are morally bound to ensure ethically sustainable labour relations.

Fourth, the human argument for collective labour rights better explains the implications of associational rights in low-income late-industrialising countries of sub-Saharan Africa. These countries have recently initiated various strategic plans to facilitate socio-economic structural transformation through industrialisation (Oqubay, 2018, 2019). As a result, the share of the apparel-manufacturing sector in industrial employment has been significantly increasing (Staritz & Whitfield, 2019). Nevertheless, labour rights violations, industrial actions, and labour disputes over low wages and long working hours have increasingly threatened the sector's performance, particularly across those apparel-exporting firms (Oya & Schaefer, 2019). Thus, the suppressive labour practice has been a pressing human rights challenge across many export-processing zones and industrial parks of late-industrialising countries of the Asian and sub-Saharan African regions (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011).

In light of the preceding explanations of the human rights perspective, structural characteristics of the GVC (race to the bottom), flawed CSR of apparel manufacturers (employers) as well as their respective global brand buyers, IPs' policies of national governments, and states' ideologies have been the major causes for the violations of the collective voices of industrial workers, particularly in the apparel industry.

First, as part of the structural externality of economic globalisation, the global apparel value chain has increasingly become hyper-competitive as the sector faces a very narrow profit margin. As such, the sector is characterised by tight pricing systems and highly demanding requirements in terms of just-in-time inventory and flexibility to meet volatile orders (Farole & Akinci, 2011; Anner, 2015). Most importantly, the just-in-time production systems within the global apparel value chain necessitate the fluid functioning of the production networks. Consequently, it requires effective labour control regimes to protect the production networks from any forms of work stoppage and disruptions through various forms of industrial actions (Wright, 1994; Ngai, 2004; Masina, 2018; Saxena, 2019). Hence, multinational apparel exporting firms usually enforce distinct labour control regimes restricting workers' associational rights.

Second, countries that follow state-led industrialisation usually try to attract foreign investors, particularly in the apparel sector, by promising less protective labour practices (Staritz & Whitfield 2019). To this effect, low wages and a highly disciplined and controlled workforce are usually presented as investment incentives to global brands (Gereffi & Frederick, 2010). To maintain the influx of FDI, national governments usually employ *de jure* or *de facto* labour control mechanisms to suppress the bargaining power of labour against the powerful capital (Anner, 2015). Such a strong business–state alliance against workers’ voices has been widely practised, particularly across those emerging investment destinations of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Hardy & Hague, 2019; Saxena, 2019).

Third, industrial parks are policy instruments, particularly of those late-industrialising countries, to accommodate FDI in those labour-intensive and export-oriented apparel industries (Ngai, 2004; Chang, 2009; Masina, 2018; Nathan, Tewari & Sarkar, 2018; Saxena, 2019). Accordingly, IPs are indispensable places in the labour sector to accommodate a sizeable number of industrial jobs (Oqubay, 2019). Nevertheless, the question of how these IPs might contribute to the sustainability of the sector by ensuring the bargaining power of local industrial workers remains. To put it differently, restricting the freedom of association and collective bargaining has been a major concern surrounding the establishment of IPs across emerging and low-income economies (Farole & Akinci, 2011). For example, IPs in China, Vietnam, Thailand, Bangladesh, Mauritius, and Madagascar have been proven as the leading sites where *de jure* and *de facto* labour controls have been enforced (Ngai, 2004; Chang, 2009; Oya & Schaefer, 2019).

In this study, the human rights approach to collective labour relations was adopted to compressively analyze workers’ associational rights in selected apparel exporting-firms in Ethiopia’s IPs from the government’s policies. The human rights argument enabled the researcher to appropriate the CSR premises to analyze the compliance record of employing firms and global brand buyers concerning the collective voices of industrial workers.

3. Methodology

3.1 The rationale for the selection of research sites

The study sites were: EIZ in Dukum, Bole Lemi I IP in Addis Ababa, and Hawassa IP in Hawassa. These three-targeted IPs were the first generation of industrial sites in Ethiopia. They generated thousands of employment opportunities by hosting several multinational apparel firms. Only multinational apparel-exporting firms were selected because they are priority sectors of Ethiopia’s state-led industrialisation. Industrial parks are the leading workplaces where serious violations of associational rights are committed, particularly across late-industrialising countries of the Global South, such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, Mexico, Madagascar, Namibia, Kenya and Ethiopia (Staritz & Whitfield, 2019).

A total of three major foreign apparel-exporting firms from the three IPs were selected based on their number of employees, time of operation, and country of origin. Therefore, American, Chinese and Indian manufacturers were selected. The table below summarises the basic descriptions of the three selected major apparel sourcing firms (as designated or coded as A1, A2, and A3).

Table 1: Information about the names and locations of selected firms, as well as their respective brands

No	Names (codes) of selected firms	Names of industrial sites where the selected firms are located	Names and nationalities of brands sourcing products from the selected firms	No of jobs created by the selected firms	Market destination
1	A1	Bole Lemi 1 Industrial Park	X (USA) and Y (European (Sweden))	6 000	EU & US markets
2	A2	Eastern Industrial Zone	X (USA) and Y (European (Sweden))	500	US markets
3	A3	Hawassa Industrial Park	X (USA)	3 000	EU & US markets

Source: Author's computation, June 2021

More than 90% of the workers across the firms were women without a high school exit level qualification. Additionally, these workers were predominantly from the different rural areas of the country with diverse cultural (religious and linguistic) backgrounds and little know-how about industrial culture.

3.2 Research design

This study provides an in-depth and contextual understanding of the implication of Ethiopia's state-led industrialisation on the collective labour rights of local industrial workers, particularly at the country's IPs. As such, an exploratory research design was employed as it enables both the researcher and the informants to get to know each other and build confidence to freely exchange their views about the existing collective labour rights challenges. Thus, the design enabled the researcher to obtain a plausible understanding of the labour rights context through various qualitative methods such as focus group discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews, and other relevant tools.

3.3 Data sources and sampling technique

The researchers conducted 46 semi-structured interviews. They conducted interviews with former and active employees of the firms under enquiry, members of workers' councils, firm managers, experts, brands' sustainability managers, regional representatives of ILO in Addis Ababa as well as officials of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs (BoLSA), Investment Commission (IC), Industrial Park Development Corporation (IPDC), and Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Union (CETU). With the consent of the participants, all interviews were tape-recorded. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes to an hour. Moreover, twelve FGDs were

conducted with eight to twelve participants for each discussion. Six out of the total twelve FGDs were also conducted with workers from the three firms (two from each of the three firms). The discussants were selected purposefully by considering variables, particularly gender and years of service. The other six FGDs were conducted as follows: three FGDs with BoLSA representatives at Bole Lemi I, Eastern, and Hawassa IPs, one FGD with CETU experts, and one FGD with ILO experts and finally, an additional FGD with brands' sustainability managers. Finally, relevant international, regional, national, and industry-level legislation, policies, and reports were used as additional secondary data sources.

A purposive sampling approach was used. This strategy provided the flexibility to meet workers (of all years of service and gender) with a range of experiential knowledge and to explore their views and interests. It also allowed the identification of knowledgeable and appropriate informants and discussants from across the above individuals and offices. Table 2 provides the main data collection instruments and data sources.

Table 2: General information about interviewees, discussants and other data sources

No	Types of data collection instruments and sources		Identity of interviewees and discussants	Places where interviews and FGDs were conducted
1	Interviews	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews with active and former employees of the three selected apparel industries	Bole Lemi I, Hawassa, and Eastern Industrial Zones
		Key informant interviews	Key informant interviews with members of the workers' council	Bole Lemi I, Hawassa, and Eastern Industrial Zones
			Key informant interviews with representatives of employing firms	Bole Lemi I, Hawassa, and Eastern Industrial Zones
			Key informant interviews with experts and officials of global brands, ILO, CETU, MoLSA, BoLSA, and IC	Addis Ababa
2	Focus group discussions (FGDs)		FGD with workers and managers of employing firms	Bole Lemi I, Hawassa, and Eastern Industrial Zones
			Representatives of global brand buyers, as well as CETU	Addis Ababa
3	International and national labour rights and other relevant policy documents and reports		ILO Conventions and Domestic labour legislations	

Source: Author's computation, June 2022

3.4 Data collection and analysis

The fieldwork across the three IPs took place in 2020. Though there is no absolute clear-cut distinction in terms of different phases of fieldwork, the steps of getting to know the context outside and inside the three IPs and the lifestyle of workers represent the preliminary field visits. Hence, the researchers started to create different formal and informal networks with workers, representatives of CETU, MoLSA, BoLSA and IC, which

helped them sufficiently acquire the relevant data from the informants and discussants. This approach helped to create a space for discussions with these stakeholders individually and in groups.

Informed by the preliminary field visits, lists of guiding questions were developed. The interview guide was designed with open-ended questions to allow the researchers to pose research questions based on the conversation. In addition, the guiding questions of the semi-structured interviews were continuously amended according to the emerging themes from the preceding interviews. This allowed the researchers to refine their understanding of the ideologies and beliefs expressed and to be guided by participants' sense of what is significant about these.

Most of the interviews were undertaken over a tight time scale from the beginning of February to mid-March 2020 to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the data collection tasks, particularly across the three IPs. The recorded interviews were then transcribed, translated, and organised for further analysis. FGDs were conducted after the semi-structured interviews. Each FGD aimed to seek further information and triangulate semi-structured interviews. Both the interviews and FGDs were crucial for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding about the implications of Ethiopia's existing ideological as well as industrial and labour or human rights policy environments on the collective voices of the country's labour force.

Concerning data analysis, partial data analysis started even while the data collection process was underway. During fieldwork, the researchers summarised their annotated diary daily as part of their first-hand analysis. Field data were systematically analysed to draw out key themes and issues. They also transcribed the data, categorising and coding to understand the entire data's general form. Audio records were also transcribed, themed, and coded to enrich other qualitative data collected through interviews and FGDs. The complete set of reorganised and coded field notes and summarised reports were re-read, and the necessary sections were highlighted according to the emerging themes. The interpreted and summarised field notes were typed and analysed in the form of a report to make it manageable for the final write-up.

4. Results and discussion

According to the data obtained from FGDs, interviews, reports, and relevant policy documents, Ethiopia's state-led industrialisation has created a strong business–state alliance against the collective voices of the country's industrial workers, particularly across those labour-intensive apparel-exporting industrial parks. As such, the country's industrial policymaking suppresses the associational rights of local industrial workers in the sector. In line with this, this study presents findings of the country's major labour control mechanisms enforced by the Ethiopian government and apparel-exporting firms (employers) at those selected IPs of the country.

4.1 Curbing labour rights institutions

As the finding revealed, Ethiopia's state-led industrialisation has implemented various mechanisms towards disciplining and suppressing the collective voices of its local labour force at the study sites. Weakening the powers and roles of the country's labour rights institutions have been among those repressive measures. In this regard, the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU) has been the primary target institution.

Historically, CETU was the most powerful representative of Ethiopian workers at the national level, which replaced the All-Ethiopia Trade Unions in 1993. Concerning its organisational structure, CETU has been at the top of the institutional hierarchy to deliberate on national labour policy issues with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) and the Ethiopian Employer's Federation. Nevertheless, the workers currently employed across the country's apparel-exporting IPs have been beyond the reach of the CETU, and their freedom of association has been categorically denied by coordinated measures of the government and employing firms.² Unfortunately, such a repressive labour practice has continued even after the post-2018 reforms and the enactment of more protective labour legislation in 2019.

In principle, institutions such as CETU are required to effectively and independently channel workers' voices into improvements in wages and other working conditions by influencing government policies and actions. Yet, there is doubt that CETU has had a tangible influence on Ethiopia's overarching developmental plans to improve workers' working conditions. Instead, it has simply reiterated the experiences of more co-opted national trade unions in Asia, most notably Bangladesh. Accordingly, despite its recent claims that it is the strong and independent representative of the country's labour force, CETU has practically failed to challenge the government's repressive labour practice promoting poverty wages and highly controlled labour practices against the collective voices of industrial workers (Yirgalem, 2019). Consequently, those global apparel manufacturers across the country's IPs still pay the lowest basic salary in the world, which ranges from \$22 to \$34 per month. Subsequently, local workers struggle to get by, let alone save any money or send cash home to their families in the countryside. All these demonstrations sufficiently infer that CETU's actual performance did not object to the wider objectives of the country's state-led industrialisation, facilitating industrial catch-up at the expense of minimal protection for its local force.

One of the government's strategies has been to formally restrict CETU's access to workers at their workplaces for awareness creation and training that might help improve their class consciousness. The government and employing firms claimed associational rights should not be CETU's and other outside initiatives'. In this connection, as experts from both ILO³ and CETU⁴ clearly explained, the problem is worse across the country's IPs where all workers are still currently without any form of collective identity or labour

2 Key informant interview with a representative of the Industrial Federation of Textile Leather & Garment Workers Trade Union (IFTLGWTU) (CETU), Addis Ababa, 26 February 2020.

3 Key Informant interviews with an expert in ILO Regional Office Addis Ababa, 25 February 2020.

4 Key informant interviews with Kassahun Folo, the President of CETU, Addis Ababa, 24 February 2020.

unions. In coordination with employing firms, the Ethiopian government frequently created negative impressions in the minds of workers who delegitimised CETU, sectoral federations, and firm-level labour unions, thereby creating mutual distrust among workers and these representative institutions. Additional institutional limitations of CETU and its affiliated labour rights institutions have been attributed to the fact that they were understaffed, underfinanced, and have had limited experience and skills to strongly confront the repressive labour practices of both the government and employers.⁵

The other labour protection institutions, which have been systematically weakened by Ethiopia's state-led industrialisation, have been the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) and its regional affiliates, and the Bureaus of Labor and Social Affairs (BoLSA). MoLSA and BoLSA are government institutions with the power to monitor the enforcement of national as well as international labour rights, at least at the policy level. Nevertheless, these institutions have not enforced existing minimum labour rights standards. Instead, they have been appropriated as loyal to Ethiopia's government industrial policy priority, facilitating industrial catch-up by promoting FDI even at the cost of minimum labour standards.

To fulfil the above industrial policy imperatives, the government has limited the roles, capacity, and autonomy of MoLSA and BoLSA from effectively enforcing the country's labour and human rights of workers, including their associational rights. Furthermore, particularly across the country's IPs, their labour inspection activities have usually been disrupted by those pro-investment agencies such as the Industrial Park Development Corporation (IPDC), Investment Commission (IC), and Ministry of Trade and Industry (MoTI) claiming that such monitoring activities could ultimately discourage the influx of FDI.

Furthermore, compared to similar law-enforcing institutions, MoLSA has been the least-financed and least-organised ministerial office where its ministerial position has been marginal until the coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy in 2018. Instead, the Ethiopian government has empowered those pro-investment government agencies such as IC and IPDC to handle labour relations.⁶ For instance, the Industrial Peace Directorate Office, a branch of the IC, has been empowered to handle labour matters, including labour strikes.⁷ It is also only after 2018 that MoLSA and BoLSA opened offices across the country's IPs following the various forms of 'wildcat' strikes at Bole Lemi I, Hawassa, and Eastern Industrial zones. Finally, the government's repressive tactics have also extended to restrict other human rights organisations, including the media, by preventing them from visiting industrial workplaces to report independently about the actual work conditions. As a result, independent human rights reports about the labour conditions at the country's IPs have been scant, particularly before the country's current reforms for political liberation in 2018.

5 Key Informant interviews with an expert in ILO Regional Office Addis Ababa, 25 February 2020.

6 Key informant interviews with BoLSA representatives at the EIZ, Hawassa, and Bole Lemi I IPs, 29 February, 2 and 4 March 2020.

7 Key informant interview with the Vice President, Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Union (CETU), Addis Ababa, 20 February 2020.

4.2 Exceptionally suppressive labour practice at the apparel industry at Ethiopia's IPs

The predominant experiences of apparel manufacturing IPs have plausibly demonstrated their policy priority for economic upgrading (industrial upgrading, linkages, skills transfer, job creation, and export earnings) over social upgrading, including associational rights of workers (Gereffi & Frederick, 2010). This has been demonstrated across those emerging and late-comer economies of South East Asia and some Sub-Saharan African countries. Likewise, Ethiopia's IPs policies have been a direct emulation of the South East Asian model. Consequently, there have been more than twelve IPs, which are operating and currently creating industrial jobs for about 90 000 workers. Yet, as expressly testified by an informant,⁸ the Ethiopian government's IPs policy concerning the labour sector prioritises facilitating job creation and industrial upgrading over decent work and working conditions. In this connection, as it has been exhaustively discussed by the discussants,⁹ in addition to cheap labour, the government employs *de facto* or *de jure* labor control mechanisms across the country to suppress the collective labor rights (freedom of association, right to collective bargaining, and the right to industrial action) of workers.

Part of its repressive measures, the government has securitised and militarised the country's IPs, thereby putting psychological and physical pressure on those workers who claimed their freedom of association.¹⁰ Furthermore, informants, who were victims of the police arrests and former employees at Bole Lemi I, Hawassa, and Eastern Industrial sites, revealed that the government employed its criminal justice system against workers who had allegedly engaged in the country's political protests and 'wildcat' strikes in 2017.¹¹ To silence their voices, workers were arrested and encountered physical violence by the police and security forces across the country's IPs. These violations of rights had been the common mechanisms of the Ethiopian government to silence the collective voices of workers. This, in turn, has prevented workers from freely deliberating and investigating better working conditions, including associational rights. Besides, the government had been actively blocking workers at the industrial parks from exercising their associational rights. Consequently, they were not able to share their voices among themselves as well as with other external stakeholders and human rights organisations about their working conditions.¹²

Following the preceding national measures of Ethiopia's state-led industrialisations towards the labour sector at the country's IPs, workers at these sites have been exceptionally deprived of their basic labour and human rights at work. Most importantly,

8 Ibid.

9 FGDs with employees at Hawassa and Bole Lemi I IPs, 26 and 29 February 2020.

10 Interviews with former employees at Bole Lemi I, Hawassa, and Eastern Industrial sites, 25, 26 and 29 February 2020.

11 Ibid.

12 Key informant interview with the President of IFTLGTU, Addis Ababa, 24 February 2020.

as unanimously demonstrated by the informants¹³ and the discussants,¹⁴ workers' associational rights have been completely suppressed so that it was impossible to find a single labour union formally registered. In this regard, such a categorical denial of associational rights of workers at the country's IPs has been different to the experiences of workers outside the IPs. For example, most large textile and apparel firms operating outside the IPs such as Kombolcha Textile, Almeda, and AIKAADIS have already ensured the freedom of association of their employees.¹⁵ Workers of major apparel exporters outside the parks have exercised their rights to collective bargaining and have developed mutually-agreed collective agreements governing their employment relations.¹⁶ The underlying cause for an exceptionally repressive labour practice at the country's IPs is related to the government's ideological and industrial policy commitment to attract multinational apparel manufacturers and brands to these sites by following weak labour practices.¹⁷

The repressive measures against the collective voices of local industrial workers at the country's IPs have also been enforced by the multinational apparel industries as employers. As they openly claimed during the interviews,¹⁸ these multinational employing firms strongly contested all the external efforts either by CETU or other labour rights initiatives towards the unionisation of workers at IPs claiming that such external drives are unlawful acts of external intrusions into their internal human resource management.¹⁹ In this connection, as sufficiently explained by the discussants,²⁰ the government shared employing firms' stand against any external initiatives towards the unionisation of workers at the IPs. In reality, however, this has been part of the systematic repression used by employing firms against the workers' legitimate quest for strong and independent unions that could firmly stand for the improvements of their working conditions. Instead, as Oya and Schaefer (2019:19) described, multinational apparel industries in Ethiopia's IPs have emulated the tactics of similar manufacturers operating in Bangladesh and Mauritius by forming co-opted and affiliated or artificial 'workers councils'.

Interviewees, however, argued that in reality, these management controlled 'workers councils' functioning as trade unions in some of the apparel industries in Ethiopia's IPs are in fact unlawful.²¹ They are in violation of Ethiopia's international commitments, the country's constitution, and the labour proclamation since the manner of their

13 Key informant interview with the President of IFTLGTU, Addis Ababa, 24 February 2020.

14 FGDs with employees at Hawassa and Bole Lemi I IPs, 26 and 29 February 2020.

15 Key informant interview with the President of IFTLGTU, Addis Ababa, 24 February 2020.

16 Key informant interviews with an expert in ILO Regional Office, Addis Ababa, 25 February 2020.

17 Ibid.

18 Key informant interviews with officials of the Investment Commission (IC), Addis Ababa, 26 February 2020.

19 Key informant interviews with managers of apparel firms at the EIZ, Hawassa, and Bole Lemi I Ips, 24 and 26 February 2020.

20 FGD with ILO regional experts, Addis Ababa, 4 February 2020.

21 Key informant interview with the President of IFTLGTU, Addis Ababa, 24 February 2020.

formation has not been on the basis of free, active, and independent participation of workers.²² Similarly, workers did not accept the council members as their independent representatives, questioning their legality and their poor track-records in representing workers' protections.²³ Accordingly, although the firms' managers claimed²⁴ that 'workers councils' can better promote employees' interests than formally institutionalised trade unions, informants from workers testified otherwise.²⁵ In this regard, members of the councils as informants from the employing firms projected the poor treatment of workers at the sites (poverty wages and other non-wage conditions of work) to poor industrial culture, low efficiency of workers, and the limitation of government.²⁶ From these accounts, it is plausible to infer that the 'workers councils' represented the firms' interests rather than being the voices of workers.

Global apparel manufacturers operating across Ethiopia's IPs employed various repressive measures against the freedom of information, expression, and associations of their workers. In this regard, workers' exchanges of ideas with one another and with other third-party stakeholders about employment relations have been treated by employing firms as serious disciplinary offences for breaching firms' secrets.²⁷ As a result, workers were required to refrain from exposing their working conditions, including their lack of associational rights, to labour inspectors from human rights organisations, brands' labour auditors, and the media.²⁸ Only firm co-opted members of the 'workers councils' have been allowed to communicate with external labour rights organisations and compliance auditors. Firms often intimidated workers with wage deductions or termination of their employment if they were found discussing problems and the solutions for their working conditions.²⁹

From a human rights perspective, however, such a broader restriction against workers by employers in the country's IPs is a gross violation of the human rights of workers as human beings to freely express their ideas, views, and aspirations. Furthermore, from a labour rights perspective, this infringes the associational rights of workers, as protected by Ethiopian laws,³⁰ the international human and labour rights standards,³¹ and buyer codes. Finally, from the perspective of CSR of buyers, firms' actions to prevent workers from providing information to buyers essential to the meaningful enforcement of labour

22 Ibid.

23 FGDs with employees at Hawassa and Bole Lemi I IPs, 26 and 29 February 2020.

24 Ibid.

25 Key informant interviews with managers of apparel firms at the EIZ, Hawassa, and Bole Lemi I IPs, 24 and 26 February 2020.

26 Key informant interviews with members of workers councils of apparel firms at Hawassa and Bole Lemi I IPs, 24 and 25 February 2020.

27 FGDs with employees of apparel firms at the EIZ, Hawassa, and Bole Lemi I IPs, 25, 26 and 29 February 2020.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 For details, see the Ethiopian Labor Proclamation No.1156/2019a.

31 For details, see, ILO Convention 87, arts 3, 5 and 6.

standards violates brands' codes of conduct.³² Thus, such a broader restriction to freedom of expression and associational rights of workers seriously hampers the operation of buyers' monitoring programmes that necessitate workers' involvement.³³ Nevertheless, as sufficiently testified by our respondents, such claims of global brands towards labour compliance is predominantly a white lash.³⁴

Moreover, as testified by the informants,³⁵ multinational apparel firms across the country's IPs deliberately overloaded workers through overtime work and secluded them in tight work schedules. This, in turn, has put time constraints on workers to discuss their working conditions actively and collectively. Besides, firms' managers and supervisors did not allow workers to initiate their associational rights at the workplace and inside the IPs. Similarly, they rejected CETU's initiative to organise workers at IPs claiming that the right to unionisation shall not be from outside pressures.³⁶ Also, they imposed punitive and unlawful disciplinary measures against those employees who have been involved in the unionisation process.³⁷ Finally, as noted by the president of CETU, all the above direct and systematic restrictions to the associational rights and bargaining powers of local workers by the underlying employing firms have been performed tacitly with the realisation of the Ethiopian government.³⁸

Similarly, global apparel brands sourcing from Ethiopia's IPs have been part of the violation of the associational rights of local industrial workers. Though they accepted the fundamentals of workers' associational rights, they used to share employing firms' arguments. Hence, they also claimed that the drive for freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining of workers should not come from outside forces. For them, questions of freedom of association ought to come from within the workers and not from MoLSA, CETU, or other outside forces. In this regard, a key informant, who is the Vice President of Corporate Responsibility at one of the brands under discussion,³⁹ claimed:

As a global brand, we are fully committed to freedom of association. Our supplier firms shall open their door to facilitate mutual understanding and communication through freedom of association, collective bargaining, and social dialogue to ensure inclusive and sustainable GVCs that qualify for compliance with universal labour standards. Nevertheless, freedom of association shall be initiated by the workers themselves. Yes, the choice to and not to organize shall entirely be left to the workers themselves. Before

32 Key informant interview with the Vice President of Corporate Responsibility of one of the brands under investigation, Addis Ababa, 24 February 2020.

33 Ibid.

34 Key informant interviews with ILO Regional Office Representative, Addis Ababa, 25 February 2020.

35 Interviews with former employees at Bole Lemi I, Hawassa, and Eastern Industrial sites, 25, 26 and 29 February 2020.

36 Key informant interviews with managers of apparel firms at the EIZ, Hawassa, and Bole Lemi I IPs, 24 and 26 February 2020.

37 Interviews with former employees at Bole Lemi I, Hawassa, and Eastern Industrial sites, 25, 26 and 29 February 2020.

38 Key informant interview with the deputy president of CETU, Addis Ababa, 20 February 2020.

39 Key informant interview with the Vice President of Corporate Responsibility of one of the brands under investigation, Addis Ababa, 24 February 2020.

organizing workers across Ethiopia's IPs, awareness creation and training shall also be provided to employers, managers, supervisors, and employees. In this respect, CETU's rush out towards unionization was premature; rather, it shall be enforced through a gradual deliberative process among various stakeholders.

In a similar vein, as plausibly explained by the discussants, brands' poor labour auditing practices have been part of the violation.⁴⁰ They usually employ, among others, third-party labour auditing mechanisms, which enforce short annual visits to the factories to monitor the enforcement of the associational rights of workers.⁴¹ Moreover, the absence of meaningful consultation mechanisms with workers, a lack of transparency of the audit results, and failures to correct violations have been among the major limitations of labour auditing practices of global brands sourcing from Ethiopia's IPs.⁴²

The above explanations support the argument of Anner (2015) that global brands and their suppliers' firms did not want to see the enforcement of the associational rights of workers for two major reasons. First, strong and independent unions inevitably consolidate the collective pressures (collective bargaining and various forms of industrial action, including strikes) of workers. This will, in turn, necessitate employers to lose the existing labour cost comparative advantages since the organised and collective voices and actions of workers would force them to improve the existing poverty wages.⁴³ Second, allowing workers' associational rights legitimises and promotes various forms of industrial actions that may disrupt the flow of firms' and buyers' production networks. Hence, as explained by Oya and Schaefer (2019), global apparel manufacturers and brands operating across Ethiopia's IPs have usually opposed the strong bargaining powers of their workers. For them, the highly competitive trends of the global apparel production network do necessitate uninterrupted and just-in-time production systems, which are free from various forms of industrial actions.

There has been a common track record across the fast fashion apparel industries to move their production locations to other destination countries where labour standards are not policy priorities, as sufficiently explained by CETU. In this regard, most apparel companies operating across Ethiopia's IPs came from Bangladesh, China, and India after the recent rises in production costs, particularly associated with increased wages and growing pressures for labour standards there (Staritz, Plank & Morris, 2016). For example, one of the representatives of a global brand manufacturer under investigation, while explaining its motivating factors to prefer Ethiopia over Kenya, reiterated that it identified the country's low labour cost and other suppressive labour practices as key investment incentives.⁴⁴

40 FGD with ILO regional experts, Addis Ababa, 4 February 2020.

41 Key informant interviews with ILO Regional Office Representative, Addis Ababa, 25 February 2020.

42 Ibid.

43 FGD with ILO regional experts, Addis Ababa, 4 February 2020.

44 Key informant interview with the Vice President of Corporate Responsibility of one of the brands under investigation, Addis Ababa, 24 February 2020.

All in all, the preceding restrictions to freedom of association have made workers across Ethiopia's IPs voiceless with no formally registered labour unions. Nevertheless, this has not prevented them from informally organising themselves and conducting various forms of 'wildcat' strikes towards improving their working conditions. For instance, various 'wildcat' strikes have been common across the country's IPs. According to workers as informants, the quest for a more viable expropriation policy towards those farmlands appropriated for the expansion of IPs through ensuring fair compensation has been one of the leading drives for those industrial actions. Moreover, from a labour rights perspective, workers' major demands ranged from better wages to respect for freedom of association.

In April 2018, a new administration assumed political power under the political leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The new administration has started to ease those repressive policies, freed political prisoners, and removed restrictions on workers' freedom of expression and associational rights. For example, the administration has also developed a more protective labour proclamation (Proclamation No. 1156/19, 2019). To promote the collective labour rights of workers, it maintains that the minimum membership level to form a first-level trade union shall be ten (Proclamation No. 1156/19, 2019:art 114(2)). Nevertheless, as sufficiently illustrated by the discussants, after three years of regime change, few practical improvements have been made concerning the freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining of industrial workers, particularly across the country's IPs.⁴⁵ For example, the freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining have not been enforced across the country's IPs. Similarly, though Ethiopia formulated new labour legislation outlining the minimum wage in 2019, there has not been any tangible change to this effect even after three years of its formulation. Thus, beyond a few policy reforms and political liberalisations of the current administration, the fundamental ideological assumption of a developmental state and suppressive labour practices continue across the country's IPs.

5. Conclusion

Similar to the historical experience of Southeast Asian countries, Ethiopia's state-led industrialisation has been based on the overarching ideological premise that the existence of a highly organised labour institution could disrupt the smooth industrial production process and thereby affect the influx of FDI (Oya & Schaefer, 2019). Accordingly, Ethiopia has followed various forms of repressive mechanisms to weaken the national trade union, which is the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU). It has formally prohibited CETU from initiating workers to organise themselves at their respective workplaces. It has weakened CETU's leadership using various administrative and financial manipulations. As a result, the power of CETU as an independent representative national labour rights institution has been significantly limited. Besides, CETU has been co-opted towards supporting the predominant policies by downsizing workers' legitimate demands for

45 FGD with ILO regional experts, Addis Ababa, 4 June 2022.

better labour protections. In a similar vein, Ethiopia's state-led industrialisation has deliberately weakened the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA), which is in charge of enforcing labour standards. As a result, MoLSA and affiliated labour rights institutions have been quite silent or reluctant to take protective measures to ensure that investors comply with Ethiopia's labour laws and regulations behind the factory gates (and behind the IP gates).

Likewise, multinational apparel manufacturers operating across the country's IPs have employed various mechanisms to suppress workers' voices. For example, they usually put time pressure on their workers to prevent them from discussing their associational rights. Moreover, they have employed punitive disciplinary measures against workers who initiated unionisations and labour strikes. Additionally, they initiated the establishment of affiliated trade unions to avoid any external drive for the realisation of independent and strong labour unions organised by the free and active participation of workers. Furthermore, weak labour auditing practices of global apparel brand buyers sourcing from Ethiopia's IPs have contributed to the violation. All these repressive mechanisms of employers against the voices of their workers have also been backed by the tacit consent of the Ethiopian government.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that Ethiopia's industrial policy has significantly failed to bring about sustainable industrial development in the apparel sector operating in the country's industrial parks. Unless Ethiopia's categorically ideological commitment to the East Asian state-led industrialisation of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s ends, the suppressive labour practices against the voices of local apparel industrial workers will continue to be pressing labour and human rights agendas in the sector. Hence, Ethiopia's activist industrial policy needs to find a way to navigate a reasonable balance between facilitating industrial catch-up and ensuring labour standards for inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable labour relations.

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