



# Climate discourses as barriers to rights-based adaptive social protection: How historical politics shape Ethiopia's climate-smart safety net

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## ABSTRACT

A rights-based approach to 'adaptive social protection' holds promise as a policy measure to address structural dimensions of vulnerability to climate change such as inequality and marginalisation, yet it has been failing to gain traction against production and growth-oriented interventions. Through the lens of Ethiopia's flagship Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), we trace the role of climate discourses in impeding progress towards socially transformative outcomes, despite the importance of social protection for building resilience. We argue that intertwining narratives of moral leadership and green growth associated with Ethiopia's national climate strategy shape how the PSNP is rendered 'climate-smart'. These narratives, however, are embedded within politics that have historically underpinned the country's drive for modernisation and growth-oriented policies, particularly in dealing with food insecurity. Like pre-existing narratives on development and the environment, they rationalise the presence of a strong central State and its control over natural resources and rural livelihoods. The PSNP is thus conditioned to favour technocratic, productivist approaches to adapting to climate change that may help reproduce, rather than challenge the entrenched politics at the root of vulnerability. Ultimately, this case study demonstrates how climate discourses risk diluting core rights-based dimensions of social protection, contradicting efforts to address the structural dimensions of vulnerability to climate change.

## 1. Introduction

Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) is the second largest social protection programme in sub-Saharan Africa. It was conceived of in the early 2000s to address recurrent food crises associated with seasonal droughts and reduce the country's dependence on humanitarian relief in this process. Due to an environmental rehabilitation focus in its public works component, however, the PSNP has begun attracting attention as "the largest climate change adaptation programme in Africa" (European Commission, 2015). Government efforts to maximise the PSNP's 'climate-smart potential' have followed, as part of a wider goal to implement the country's much-applauded Climate Resilient Green Economy (CRGE) strategy.

Because climate change exacerbates existing societal inequalities, a rights-based approach to social protection that challenges uneven power structures can be transformative for marginalised rural communities facing increasing climate risks. This paper argues that discourses supporting the integration of climate change considerations into social protection are deeply political, however, and can be barriers to such

social transformation. In the case of Ethiopia, narratives of moral leadership and green growth associated with the CRGE are shaping the evolution of the 'climate-smart' PSNP. Yet, these narratives represent a continuation of politics that have historically governed the country's development and environment priorities, and legitimised a strong central State's control over natural resources and a large, multi-ethnic, dispersed population. Efforts to 'climate-smart' the PSNP consequently may reinforce the programme's technocratic, productivist orientation, reproducing – rather than challenging – the political status quo. Overall, this case study offers a cautionary lesson on the risk of diluting core rights-based dimensions of social protection to support climate discourses, and thus contradicting efforts to address the structural dimensions of vulnerability to climate change.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a conceptual introduction to growth- and rights-based approaches to social protection, together with an overview of the PSNP and our methods for data collection and analysis. Section 3 foregrounds Ethiopia's recent political history to better understand the socio-historical context underpinning the country's development and climate narratives. Section 4

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examines the role of the PSNP in the Government's efforts to recast Ethiopia as a global leader on climate change, shedding its past image of a famine-stricken country. Section 5 then argues that entrenched narratives of population pressure on the environment further justify a highly technocratic approach to rendering the PSNP 'climate-smart'. Conclusions are offered in Section 6.

## 2. Social protection in a changing climate

### 2.1. Growth-oriented and rights-based approaches to social protection

Social protection has played a prominent role in international development over the past three decades (World Bank, 2018a). The term broadly describes public policy measures aiming to protect people at risk of falling into poverty or vulnerability from doing so at any point in their life, and lift them out of these situations when they do (Norton et al., 2001). Social safety net programmes – the predominant form of social protection in lower income countries – involve direct and regular cash or in-kind transfers to their participants (World Bank, 2018b). Although these transfers are sometimes conditional on the fulfilment of a specified action or engagement in public works, such programmes do not depend on any financial contribution from their participants.

Safety nets are typically approached from what Devereux et al. (2016) would describe as a 'growth-oriented' perspective, which considers social protection to be an *instrument* for poverty reduction and economic growth. Indeed, besides providing a cushion against livelihood shocks, safety net programmes often seek to support participants in taking risks, making investments, and thus becoming more productive members of society who can contribute to economic growth (Holzmann and Kozel, 2007). In this manner, they align with neoliberal models of development and are often supported by institutions like the World Bank. A limitation of such a growth-oriented approach, however, is its narrow focus on *economic* protection against income, consumption or asset-related shocks (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2007). As Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux (2007) argue, it treats vulnerability as an exogenous factor to be managed – "a characteristic of a person or group, an event affecting a person or group, or a stage in a person's lifecycle" (23) – rather than as emerging from and being embedded within the socio-political context.

A rights-based approach to social protection, on the other hand, considers social protection to be a basic human right, which everyone should be entitled to make claims to through institutionalized national policy frameworks (Devereux et al., 2016). Such an approach to social protection can furthermore point to and challenge the power relations and structures that marginalise certain groups within societies and render them more vulnerable to poverty than others, because it promotes a redistribution of wealth and opportunities and views social inclusion, cohesion and empowerment as essential for lasting poverty reduction (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2007). In fact, whilst the growth-oriented and rights-based approaches to social protection are not mutually exclusive, the latter's social transformation objectives emerged out of critiques that a singularly productivist, growth-oriented framing cannot adequately address root causes of persistent and multi-dimensional poverty, such as inequality and marginalisation (Gentilini and Omamo, 2011; Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2007). Beyond providing *economic* protection, a rights-based approach to social protection thus extends to "the pursuit of policies that integrate individuals equally into society, allowing everyone to take advantage of the benefits of growth, and enabling excluded or marginalised groups to claim their rights," (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2007: 24). School feeding schemes, for instance, contribute to economic growth and productivity as well as to social equity by stabilising food consumption and enhancing access to education for poor and social excluded children, Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux (2007) write. Transformative elements of social protection might also include actions that are complementary to resource transfers, which enable people to access their rights to

livelihood enhancing assets—for example, support to trade unions, minimum wage legislation, anti-discrimination campaigns, or efforts to challenge intra-household division of resource ownership, access and use (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004).

Critical adaptation scholars have long highlighted how pre-existing socio-political and institutional contexts similarly shape vulnerability to climate change, yet are left undisturbed by overwhelmingly managerial and technocratic adaptation efforts (Eriksen et al., 2021, 2015; Lemos et al., 2007; Mikulewicz, 2020, 2019; Nightingale, 2017; O'Brien et al., 2007; Paprocki, 2019, 2018; Pelling et al., 2015; Watts, 2015). Such project-driven, time-bound interventions often only facilitate incremental adjustments directed towards biophysical hazards; not only does this approach poorly align with the longer time horizons of current and future climate variability and change, but it also risks perpetuating, redistributing or creating new vulnerability stemming from present social inequalities (Conway and Mustelin, 2014; Eriksen et al., 2021; Kates et al., 2012; O'Brien, 2012; Park et al., 2012; Pelling et al., 2015). The emerging 'adaptive social protection' (ASP) agenda, if it is approached from a rights-based perspective, thus holds promise as a policy measure that addresses some of these shortcomings (Tenzing, 2020). In fact, when Davies et al. (2009) introduced the concept, they specifically intended ASP to extend beyond reducing people's exposure to climate-related shocks and stresses, towards addressing structural constraints around poverty and climate vulnerability through social protection. This meant concentrating on transforming livelihoods rather than reinforcing coping mechanisms, emphasising autonomy and empowerment in addition to economic productivity for building resilience, and taking into account the changing nature of shocks and stresses (Davies et al., 2009). Yet, as interest in ASP grows, the agenda is increasingly limited to technical adjustments to existing programmes for managing climate risks, such as integrating climate information for informing how much, to whom and when support should be provided (Tenzing, 2020). Meanwhile, the opportunity presented by climate change for social protection to advance justice and equity – which the IPCC recognises as core aspects of climate-resilient development pathways (Olsson et al., 2014) – is overlooked.

### 2.2. Frontrunner on adaptive social protection?: Case selection and methods

Established in 2005, the PSNP is a long-running safety net programme managed by Ethiopia's Ministry of Agriculture. Given its size, longevity and how embedded it is within federal and regional government structures, it is unlikely to be dissolved if political support for the programme were to change suddenly. In fact, it has continued to grow and evolve over the years, notably by building in a contingency mechanism in 2009 for rapidly expanding the support it provides if a major drought or other shock is forecasted (Wiseman et al., 2012). For its fifth phase of implementation (2021–2025), the PSNP has been costed at USD 2,284 million (World Bank, 2021). Although it receives most of its funding from bilateral and multilateral sources (with the World Bank leading the donor coordination team), this figure includes a substantial contribution of USD 590 million in cash and in-kind by the Government of Ethiopia itself—a sure sign of its commitment to the programme.

The PSNP serves approximately eight million people across rural Ethiopia (World Bank, 2021). It seeks to prevent households from having to deplete their assets during times of need, as well as create community assets to strengthen collective resilience to shocks, particularly those related to drought (FDRE, 2014a). Support has been provided primarily through three different channels. The first is a workfare component, which covers approximately 80% of PSNP participants. Here, able-bodied adults engage in labour-intensive public works for six months of the year, in exchange for cash or food transfers. The second applies to households without adult labour capacity which receive transfers throughout the year under the 'direct-support' component, with no hard conditions attached. Through the third, 'livelihoods'

component, eligible households can access agricultural credit to help build their asset base, strengthen their livelihoods, and eventually ‘graduate’ out of the programme. As such, the PSNP is primarily an economic growth-oriented programme that supports its participants in becoming ‘productive’ members of society.

Besides being considered a bellwether on social protection among low-income countries, Ethiopia has been hailed for putting climate change at the centre of its development model since the early 2010s. Accordingly, the government has made a concerted effort in recent years to integrate climate change considerations into Ethiopia’s PSNP, among other flagship programmes. This work began in 2013 with the ‘Climate Smart Initiative’ (CSI), a pilot project funded by the UK Department for International Development and implemented over two years by a consortium of international NGOs. Then came ‘Climate-Smart Mainstreaming of the PSNP’ (CSM-PSNP), a follow-up programme funded by the European Commission and implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture over the 2017–2020 period. These highlighted the untapped role of the PSNP in the country’s climate response. Although it was not conceived as such, today, the Government refers to the PSNP as a “key response mechanism to climate change” (FDRE, 2020: 41).

There is little to suggest that the PSNP is shedding its growth-oriented approach as it ‘adapts’ to climate change; yet, adding elements of rights-based approaches for a ‘climate-smart’ PSNP is not out of reach. In 2014 – almost a decade following the establishment of the PSNP – the Federal Government adopted its first National Social Protection Policy (NSPP). Whilst the PSNP was initially treated as a temporary ‘stopgap’ for dealing with food insecurity (Lavers, 2019), the NSPP for the first time gives it permanence as a mechanism through which social welfare more broadly is upheld in the country (FDRE, 2014b). Indeed, the focus of the Policy extends beyond “taking measures of enhancing knowledge, skill, and employment opportunities of citizens to increase their incomes and asset building capabilities” (i.e. to support economic growth), to “[protecting] citizens from exclusion, [ensuring] their rights and needs by reducing the vulnerability to risk that emanates from economic and social imbalances” (FDRE, 2014a, p.29). Those it prioritises for support include children, women, people with disabilities, the elderly, the chronically ill, the unemployed, and segments of society which face violence and abuse, among others (FDRE, 2014b). In this manner, it recognises that vulnerability in Ethiopia has structural roots—i.e., that marginalisation based on gender, age, ethnicity, health, disability and employment status is prevalent in the country. Further structural drivers of vulnerability exist in Ethiopian society that are not addressed by the Policy— notably, those arising from landlessness and land tenure insecurity (Lavers, 2013; Rahmato, 2018, 2009), which are particularly relevant to this paper. Nevertheless, the PSNP, which, under the NSPP, also has a clear role in protecting those exposed to natural and humanmade calamities from falling into extreme poverty (FDRE, 2014b), does indeed have a solid policy foundation for embracing a rights-based approach to adaptive social protection. So far, however, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs that houses the NSPP has not been involved in efforts to ‘climate-smart’ the PSNP.

This paper argues that efforts to re-frame the PSNP as an adaptive, climate-smart programme may reinforce its productivist orientation and hinder its potential to be transformative. Our analysis draws on 45 official documents including Government of Ethiopia policies, reports and statements, intergovernmental communiqués, and relevant outputs from the country’s engagement with bilateral and multilateral partners in the areas of sustainable development, social protection or climate change. This is supplemented with data from 34 key informant (semi-structured) interviews with representatives from Government, donor institutions, multilateral organisations and national and international civil society, conducted over three visits to Addis Ababa between March 2019 and February 2020 as well as in London, UK and Washington D.C.,

USA.<sup>1</sup> Our study also benefitted from past experience within UN climate change negotiations between 2014 and 2018, engaging closely with delegates from Ethiopia, among other low-income countries. We approached our research inductively, narrowing our focus as data collection progressed onto the pre-existing narratives surrounding the PSNP’s establishment and its evolution as a ‘climate-smart’ programme. We used thematic coding to gauge how the PSNP is being described as or made ‘climate-smart’ by the various stakeholders involved in shaping this agenda, then employed a discourse analysis approach to situate these efforts in their socio-historical context and shed light onto the politics that underpin these choices (Alejandro, 2020, Alejandro, 2018).

A growing body of literature considers the PSNP’s contribution to poverty reduction, food security and resilience in Ethiopia in the context of climate change (Conway and Schipper, 2011; Dasgupta and Robinson, 2021; Mersha and van Laerhoven, 2018; Norton et al., 2020; Ulrichs et al., 2019; Ulrichs and Slater, 2016; Weldegebriel and Prowse, 2013; Woolf et al., 2018). In terms of the safety net’s impact on livelihoods more broadly, some studies find that this has been modest or uneven across regions, communities, households or individuals and over time (Azadi et al., 2017; Cochrane and Tamiru, 2016; Dejene and Cochrane, 2021; Duguma, 2019; Gilligan et al., 2009; Hoddinott et al., 2012; Mersha and van Laerhoven, 2018; Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2013; Weldegebriel and Prowse, 2013). Others are more positive, arguing that despite its limitations, the PSNP has succeeded in its primary goal to prevent famine and reduce chronic food insecurity (Berhane et al., 2014, 2013; Coll-Black et al., 2013; Dasgupta and Robinson, 2021; Knippenberg and Hoddinott, 2017). Its strong focus on public works has been associated with a 3.8% increase in tree cover between 2005 and 2019 in participating *woredas* (districts) in the Ethiopian Highlands (Hirvonen et al., 2022).

This paper does not seek to debate the PSNP’s effectiveness as it is currently being implemented, however. Taking a further step back, it examines the PSNP as emanating from depoliticised, techno-managerial approaches associated with neoliberal models of development that the Government and international development actors have long subscribed to (Ferguson, 1994; Hart, 2001; Li, 2007; Scott, 1999), and which emerging climate change regimes often align with (Eriksen et al., 2021; Milman and Arsano, 2014; Paprocki, 2021, 2018). Our analysis builds particularly on the rich work of Hoben (1996), Leach and Mearns (1996) and Keeley and Scoones (2003) who have stressed the importance of challenging ‘received wisdoms’ on environmental issues in Africa and giving space to alternative perspectives in the development of policy to catalyse social transformation. Although the narratives of moral leadership and green growth that we identify for Ethiopia evolved from the country’s own complex history, they actively feed into as well as respond to mandates of high-profile international processes on climate change which climate narratives around the world also reflect. As such, this study’s conclusions are not unique to the Ethiopian context. They illustrate how dominant and widespread climate discourses are used to uphold existing political interests and influence the evolution of development trajectories and interventions such as social protection. Rather than taking the opportunity of climate change to reflect on and challenge the socio-political structures that have historically shaped why certain people are more disadvantaged or vulnerable than others, these discourses may ultimately become barriers to societal transformation.

### 3. History and politics of modernisation and economic growth in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has undergone several turbulent political transformations in the last century. In the following, we briefly reflect on how a drive for modernisation, the experience of famine and State control over land resources have had bearing on the rise and fall of past regimes, to shed

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix for key informant interview dates and descriptors.

light onto the context in which the PSNP was designed and established as a growth-oriented programme.

### 3.1. Imperial ambitions for 'defensive' modernisation

A major figure in modern Ethiopian history is Haile Selassie, who reigned as Emperor from 1930 until 1974. Following in the footsteps of his predecessor Menelik II – who had famously protected Ethiopian independence during the Scramble for Africa – Haile Selassie saw value in pursuing modernisation through foreign policy (Asserate, 2015; Pan-khurst, 1967). From the 1950s, he strengthened relations with Western powers; with this came more schools, hospitals, infrastructure, trade and military might (Asserate, 2015; Zewde, 2002). Ethiopia also became a founding member of the United Nations and host to the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) under his leadership, and was instrumental to the creation of the Organisation for African Unity (the precursor to the African Union) as the continent underwent a process of decolonisation (Coleman, 2008). The country thus acquired an image of African self-confidence, independence and leadership that still resonates in Ethiopian nationalism today (Asserate, 2015; Clapham, 2018).

The absolute power held by the aging Monarch fuelled discontent, however, not least because outside of Addis, Ethiopians benefited little from his modernist reforms; most continued to lead impoverished, agrarian livelihoods, possessed no land tenure security, and had to pay rent to the land-owning aristocracy (Ottaway, 1986). The final decades of his reign were marked by civil unrest, culminating with a disastrous drought-related famine in 1972–73— imagery for which circulated around the world and stood in stark contrast to the Emperor's seemingly opulent lifestyle (Asserate, 2015; Kapuscinski, 1989; Wood, 1983). In 1974, Haile Selassie was overthrown, and the Ethiopian Empire brought to a brutal end. Thus began the 'Derg' regime, a period of military dictatorship under Mengistu Haile-Mariam.

### 3.2. Power and control under the Derg: Modernising through land reform

Under the Derg, modernisation was to be achieved through radical land reforms involving top-down management of Ethiopia's natural resources and multi-ethnic population. It immediately formed thousands of peasant associations (or *kebele*) to redistribute now-nationalised land (Bekele and Kjosavik, 2016; Ottaway, 1986, 1977; Wood, 1983). Later, it championed state farms to boost food production, influenced by the policies of the Soviet Union which provided Ethiopia with funds, machinery and technical support (Ottaway, 1986). Finally, by the mid-1980s, it pushed for collectivisation with the launch of a villagisation campaign to move scattered households into villages, together with a larger programme of resettlement that forcibly relocated millions into agriculturally productive regions (Alemu et al., 2002; Hoben, 1996; Ottaway, 1986). As Ottaway (1986) argues, these policies underlined that Ethiopia's land and resources belong to all Ethiopians, i.e. not to individual ethnic groups; as such they served to quell any attempt at regional self-government that would diminish the authority of the State.

This was a valid concern for the increasingly unpopular Mengistu regime, whose repeated land redistributions not only worsened tenure security for agrarian populations over the years (Bruce et al., 1994), but also did little to alleviate Ethiopia's severe food insecurity. On the contrary, from 1984 to 1985, the country experienced yet another devastating famine, becoming once again the focus of unwanted media attention (Keller, 1992; Müller, 2013). As it later came to light, the Derg had a clear hand in the disaster by restricting the movement of goods and aid to quash political dissidents (de Waal, 1991; Keller, 1992; Shepherd, 1985). Insurgent groups finally defeated the military regime in 1991, and, following a period of transition, formed the new Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). They elected their leader, Meles Zenawi, as its first Prime Minister in 1995.

### 3.3. New beginnings?

Ethiopia's new Constitution instituted the current system of 'ethnic federalism,' which restructured the country into nine self-administered, ethnicity-based regional states and two city administrations (Admassie and Abebaw, 2014). The Federal Government in Addis Ababa nevertheless retains much power, particularly over matters related to the country's development (Bekele and Kjosavik, 2016). As we argue next, the founding story and the design of the PSNP reflect the continued importance of modernisation and accelerated growth to advance the agenda of the new democratic regime. The practice of politics employed by the State – which i) ensures its survival against perceived threats to power (such as internal conflict, chronic food insecurity and poverty), ii) restores its influence on the world stage, and iii) rationalises its control over natural resources and a physically dispersed, multi-ethnic population – are likewise rooted in the experiences of the past. These politics are now also being reproduced through Ethiopia's climate narratives, which shape the evolution of the climate-smart PSNP.

## 4. Re-imagining Ethiopia: From famine disaster to moral climate leader

Political interest in a 'climate-smart' PSNP is intertwined with the programme's founding story and the effort it represented to transform the image of the country and its leadership. Before the establishment of the safety net in 2005, Ethiopia was relying heavily on emergency aid to relieve its drought-related food shortages. As reflected in the previous section, the population had already suffered two catastrophic famines in its recent past and become the object of highly publicised humanitarian appeals (Keller, 1992; Müller, 2013). It is reported that since the mid-1980s and up to as recently as the early 2000s, the international community was providing food relief for between 1 and 14 million Ethiopians each year (The IDL Group, 2008).

The emergency system, however, was costly in addition to being inefficient; as it was famously put, it was 'saving lives, but not livelihoods' (Raisin, 2001). Donors were growing fatigued by the endless cycle of aid provision, as Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was painfully aware (Lavers, 2017). Acting rapidly at the heels of yet another drought and food crisis in 2002–03, he therefore convened federal and regional government, UN agencies, NGOs and the donor community to explore long-term solutions to the country's challenges (Sandford and Hobson, 2011; Wiseman et al., 2012). Out of these discussions emerged the idea for the PSNP, a social safety net to complement the emergency relief system.

### 4.1. Power in food security

After decades of aid provision, the international community would have certainly played a key role in these discussions. Yet, those involved emphasise that Zenawi's strong personal support for the idea of a growth-oriented safety net is what cemented both the establishment of the PSNP and its operationalisation at such a large scale (*GR-1; IC-1; MLA-3*). For a country that has continued to be distrustful of too much external influence, breaking free from dependency on the humanitarian system was a powerful motivator for seeking alternative options (Keeley and Scoones, 2003; Wiseman et al., 2012). Moreover, it was clear that delivering on the promise of food self-sufficiency would be critical for his government to maintain power domestically, given the undeniable contribution of the last two major famines to the demise of the Imperial and military regimes (Dejene and Cochrane, 2021; Lavers, 2019, 2017). Zenawi now found himself on a similarly precarious footing because the 2002–03 drought was closely following other political crises related to the breakout of war with Eritrea (Keeley and Scoones, 2003; Lavers, 2017).

Having to so frequently declare a national emergency likewise embarrassed the Government and undermined its credibility at the

international stage (Lavers, 2019; The IDL Group, 2008). By this time, Ethiopia had become known for imagery of mass starvation that to this day epitomises conceptualisations of ‘African disaster’ (Müller, 2013). Far more critically, the famines that took place came to be understood not as the direct result of a natural hazard (drought), but of the Imperial regime’s neglect of rural populations and the Derg’s military tactics against rebel forces—i.e. they were disasters *created* by the State (de Waal, 1993, 1991). Ethiopia under the leadership of Zenawi could not be seen as yet another chapter in the nation’s history of government failure. He was determined to transform the country’s ‘basket-case’ reputation (Du Venage, 2012; Gray, 2018; Maynard, 2009) into one of progress and resilience by fully supporting the PSNP.

#### 4.2. Climate leadership

The PSNP was thus founded as part of a process of a political reimagination of Ethiopia, which, based on some criteria, has been largely successful: currently among the world’s fastest growing economies, the country is known to have made immense progress on human development over the past two decades and enjoyed (until recently) higher political stability compared to its neighbours (Clapham, 2018; Milman and Arsano, 2014; Oqubay, 2015). Now also host to the African Union, it moreover began re-assuming the crucial convening and externally facing roles it had previously played on various development issues for the continent, including climate change (Clapham, 2018; Paul and Weinthal, 2019). In fact, the unveiling of its CRGE strategy in 2011 was timed carefully to coincide with the year South Africa presided over the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC in Durban (GR-2; GR-6; NC-1). This effectively set Ethiopia as an example of African commitment towards an ambitious global climate response, and further enhanced the country’s image and influence on the international stage. Just as he was a driving force behind the establishment of the PSNP, it was the former Prime Minister who had spearheaded the development of the CRGE (Jones and Carabine, 2015).

It is important to recognise that at the time of the CRGE’s launch, climate change was still only beginning its rapid rise to prominence in the international development agenda; the Strategy thus earned Ethiopia praise for taking early steps onto a forward-looking low-carbon development pathway (Paul and Weinthal, 2019). Moreover, because of its status as a low-income country with a very negligible contribution to global emissions, the CRGE made Ethiopia a moral leader on climate change that could apply pressure on wealthier and higher emitting countries to commit to more ambitious action (Ayalew et al., 2020). In fact, the country leaned into this role as it became a more active and influential participant in the multilateral climate change governance process over the years, including by taking on various leadership positions (such as chairing the high-profile Climate Vulnerable Forum and the Least Developed Countries (LDC) negotiating bloc under the UNFCCC). When negotiations on the Paris Agreement entered their final, critical year, Ethiopia was among the first to communicate its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) to the global response, underlining that “despite being a Least Developed Country, Ethiopia has already placed itself on the path to undertake a substantial national program of climate action” (FDRE, 2015a).

The fact that efforts to integrate climate change into the PSNP started in this period is no coincidence. The notion of a ‘climate-smart’ PSNP helped to reproduce Ethiopia’s image as a climate leader particularly on adaptation and resilience, which, as had been noticed, the mitigation-focused CRGE had paid less attention to (GR-2; GR-4; GR-6; NGO-2a). The Government corrected this imbalance starting in 2015 through sectoral strategies for climate resilience in the areas of agriculture and forestry, water and energy, and transport (FDRE, 2015b, 2015c). It then followed with the INDC, also in 2015, and later with a National Adaptation Plan (NAP) in 2019, both developed as part of the country’s engagement in the UNFCCC process (FDRE, 2019, 2015a). As one of the largest programmes under the purview of the Ministry of Agriculture

which also already worked towards environmental objectives (see Section 5), the PSNP features in these documents as an example of how major development investments in the country have long played a part in building resilience to climate change. Strengthening this contribution of the safety net to national adaptation efforts through a process of climate change mainstreaming (as recommended in these strategies and plans) would have thus constituted a low-hanging fruit for Government and donors alike to act upon.

#### 4.3. Politics of vulnerability

Besides being an early adopter of low-carbon climate resilient development policy, Ethiopia’s image as a *moral* leader in this area hinges on highlighting its extreme vulnerability to adverse effects of climate change. Of course, there are many factors that contribute to the country’s high sensitivity and vulnerability to weather variability and extremes: its borders cover more than 1.1 million km<sup>2</sup>, and include some of the highest and lowest regions on earth, with correspondingly diverse and highly variable climates, seasons, and occurrence of natural hazards; moreover, it is a landlocked LDC with a rapidly increasing population of approximately 112 million, a large proportion of which is dependent on rain-fed agriculture (Admassie and Abebaw, 2014; Ayalew et al., 2020; Conway and Schipper, 2011; Niang et al., 2014). However, the founding story of the PSNP and its evolution to ‘climate-smartness’ reflect how the rhetoric of vulnerability to climate change also serves a depoliticising function.

As we have thus far argued, the PSNP was borne out of the Government’s desire to end Ethiopia’s heavy dependency on humanitarian relief, and with this, to distance itself both domestically and internationally from previous regimes that were held responsible for the country’s devastating famines. Yet, although it now ranks among the world’s fastest growing economies, chronic food insecurity to this day remains a top development challenge for the country (World Bank, 2020). What has shifted with the entry of the climate change discourse is the policy narrative’s emphasis on natural hazards, particularly drought, as the root cause of food insecurity and past famine disasters, rather than socioeconomic and political failures (Sandstrom and Juhola, 2017). This is reflected for example in the foreword for one of Ethiopia’s first climate change policy documents, the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA), issued in 2007 (two years after the establishment of the PSNP):

Current climate variability is already imposing a significant challenge to Ethiopia by affecting food security, water and energy supply, poverty reduction and sustainable development efforts, as well as by causing natural resource degradation and natural disasters. For example, the impacts of past droughts such as that of the 1972/73, 1984 and 2002/02 are still fresh in the memories of many Ethiopians. (FDRE, 2007, p. vi)

This discursive shift is also visible in Ethiopia’s most recent climate-related plans, the NAP:

... Ethiopia – as a country and its people – has been the subject of costly natural disasters in its long history. [...] ...experience has shown that the country is exposed to unpredictable rains including the complete failure of rains, seasonal shifts in rainfall patterns and shortage of rainfall (drought) and this uncertainty is expected to increase with climate change. [...] This history and limited capacity to adapt to climate risk, uncertainty and change over time has made the country and its people vulnerable to the current and anticipated impacts of climate change. (FDRE, 2019, p. 18–19).

The rhetoric applied here of vulnerability as arising primarily from climatic stressors thus reframes past famines and current food insecurity as naturalised phenomena, devoid of their socio-historical contexts. Reinforcing a deterministic relationship between climate and

development in Ethiopia is a widely cited graphic showing close association between annual rainfall and GDP in Ethiopia for the 1982–99 period (World Bank, 2006). Yet, updated analysis and alternative rainfall datasets show the association is more nuanced, is absent in the 2000s and dominated by the major drought and famine in 1984–85 (Conway and Schipper, 2011).

#### 4.4. Historical responsibility and the promise of finance

Ethiopia's image of the moral leader is furthermore inextricably tied to global narratives associated with international climate (geo)politics (as are much of its self-initiated national actions on mitigation and adaptation (Mersha and van Laerhoven, 2018)). Whilst the multilateral process dealing with climate change continues to grow more complex and granular over time, the overarching narrative of historical responsibility, for instance, which Ethiopia and other low-income countries stand by, remains central: wealthy nations must cover the costs of climate action worldwide, given that their past activities caused the climate crisis disproportionately impacting poorer countries today and hurting their right to develop. The Global South's vulnerability to climate change and limited capabilities to respond are thus understood to be outcomes of social and political factors—i.e. as linked to global power inequity—and the provision of climate finance as a matter of justice, not aid. Paradoxically, however, this high-level geopolitical narrative is also depoliticising. On one hand, such rhetoric of underdevelopment and lack of capacity usefully legitimises Western expertise and intervention on climate change (and beyond) in the Global South, as Mikulewicz (2020) notes. On the other, it obscures drivers of vulnerability to climate change present within these countries, including those that existed long before climate impacts intensified (Ribot, 2014). In this case, the notion of historical responsibility aligns well with a reframing of food insecurity in Ethiopia as arising naturally from drought, which is then intensified by the activities of the industrialised world. This not only allows for a compelling narrative on moral leadership to exist, it also provides grounds for making claims to the climate finance *it is owed* (rather than requesting humanitarian aid). Indeed, like the adoption of the CRGE (Jones and Carabine, 2015), interest in integrating climate considerations in the PSNP reflects government foresight and interest about emerging sources of finance for climate action, especially given the expectation from multilateral partners that Ethiopia's financial commitment to the PSNP should increase over time (GR-7; IC-1; MLA-1; MLA-2; MLA-6). The statement by Former Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn (Zenawi's successor) at the Paris COP in 2015, for instance, makes good use of the narrative of moral leadership in his appeal to industrialised nations to fulfil their finance obligations:

I have come to Paris, at this defining moment, to tell you of the struggles and hopes of my people; the stories of a hundred million people, who are working hard to eradicate poverty and establish a fair, prosperous and sustainable economy. [...] [...] climate change, weather variability and related disasters threaten our lives, livelihoods, and hard-fought development gains. We have seen average temperature rise, within half a century, by one degree centigrade. The rains have become unpredictable, unreliable. Extreme droughts and floods have become more frequent and severe. At the moment, El Niño-triggered drought is affecting millions of my people. We have not caused climate change. We cannot solve it on our own. We find ourselves in a situation which justifies surrender, hopelessness and bitterness. But we choose to be hopeful and proactive. [...] If poor people like us can resolve to create a carbon neutral economy, surely better placed nations can and should do much more. [...] If the poor in Ethiopia can sacrifice saving and labour, surely better placed nations can and should do more to support them. (Dessalegn, 2015)

In this manner, the narrative of Ethiopia as a moral leader attributes

any future food-related disaster both to 'nature' and the activities of high-emitters, effectively absolving those currently in power within the country of responsibility. For a State whose history has been rocked by the spectre of famine and that still grapples with internal conflict, climate discourse thus plays an instrumental part in efforts to shed its past image, supporting both the reinstatement of its influence on the global stage and the defence of its position of power at home.

This process of political reimagination from famine disaster to moral leader in the face of a global crisis does not unfold in a vacuum to shape the growth-oriented 'climate-smart' PSNP agenda, however. In the next section, we examine how pre-existing narratives of environmental degradation caused principally by the unsustainable agricultural practices of rural populations have rationalised the design of the PSNP as a public works programme, and are now cementing its technocratic approach to adapting to climate change.

## 5. Environmental rehabilitation through public works: A technical solution to poverty, food insecurity, and climate change

Those involved in early discussions about the PSNP recall deep divisions among stakeholders regarding whether it should be a public works programme—or even include such a component at all (IC-1; MLA-1; MLA-3). Whilst some had favoured unconditional food or cash transfers to prospective PSNP households, the Government insisted that recipients should have to contribute their labour in exchange for benefits so as not to create dependency (Lavers, 2017; The IDL Group, 2008; Wiseman et al., 2012). Importantly, these demands drew on a long-standing history of public works programmes ostensibly motivated by concern about environmental degradation. In what follows, we argue that entrenched narratives of population pressure on the environment have repeatedly rationalised public workfare as a technically sound policy choice, while obscuring the State's more sensitive interest to govern over how land is used by rural populations to accelerate economic growth. These are now also instrumental to Ethiopia's low-carbon and resilient climate narrative, which frames climate change primarily as a threat to growth.

### 5.1. Alleviating population pressure on the environment: From Project 2488 to PSNP

The PSNP is not the first (nor currently the only) public works programme to exist in Ethiopia. Two of Ethiopia's past large-scale and long-running 'food-for-work' initiatives even bear resemblance to the PSNP. The first is 'Project Ethiopia 2488: Rehabilitation of Forest, Grazing and Agricultural Lands' (Project 2488), established under the Derg regime in 1980 and implemented jointly by the Ministry of Agriculture and the World Food Programme (WFP). Lessons from its 20-year lifespan informed the design of the next generation WFP-led public workfare programme in the late 1990s: 'Managing Environmental Resources to Enable Transitions to more sustainable livelihoods' (MERET—the Amharic word for 'land'). Like the PSNP's public works, both programmes sought to 'rehabilitate' the country's natural resources, based on an understanding that environmental degradation (particularly soil erosion) is driving food insecurity, and that at the root of this degradation are the harmful agricultural practices of a large rural population.

To be sure, soil erosion in Ethiopia has been severe and widespread, and is in danger of worsening with projected population increase and extreme rainfall events (Haregeweyn et al., 2015; Niang et al., 2014). Although our understanding of what drives this phenomenon remains fragmented due to a high degree of regional variability and poor data availability and reliability, it is also well-established that land use change continues to be a major contributing factor (Haregeweyn et al., 2015; Nyssen et al., 2004). Soil and water conservation measures have been institutionalised and implemented in response across the country since the 1970s, and indeed, have (in aggregate) helped slow the pace of

this degradation (Bewket, 2007; Haregeweyn et al., 2015). The seriousness of soil erosion and related environmental challenges in Ethiopia should therefore not be undermined, nor should the necessity or effectiveness of the efforts undertaken to address them. However, as Hoben (1996) and Keeley and Scoones (2003) before us have argued, it is important to recognise that this narrative is not devoid of politics; it has been purposefully used and reproduced to support particular policy and governance goals.

The practicality of Project 2488's conservation agriculture objective, for instance, is easy to comprehend once it is put in context of Cold War geopolitics and the exercise of power by an authoritarian State. As Hoben (1996) argues, it was convenient for the Western donor and NGO community because it allowed for aid to be channelled directly to its 'intended beneficiaries' rather than through the Soviet-backed government. Keeping to Project 2488's narrow, technical framing as the basis for cooperation with Western powers was also in the interest of the Derg, who needed food aid to feed the army and quell civil unrest (Hoben, 1996). Moreover, the environmental degradation narrative it was premised on usefully shifted the blame for food insecurity away from the State and onto rural population's 'backwards' farming practices (Hoben, 1996; Keeley and Scoones, 2003). Indeed, an added benefit of Project 2488's environmental reclamation objective was how well it aligned with its heavy-handed programme of agrarian reform discussed earlier in this paper (Alemu et al., 2002; Hoben, 1996; Wood, 1983).

Later, the participatory approach to public works taken by MERET not only set it apart from Project 2488's top-down methods, but also helped legitimise the newly instated democratic regime. Communities were now actively involved in all stages of planning for and implementing the public works, ensuring that their priorities were not being compromised in meeting the highly technical demands of soil and water conservation (Nedessa and Wickrema, 2010). MERET thus aligned well with the novel system of decentralised governance instituted by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, which promised people greater control over decisions affecting their lives (*ibid*). As such, it helped galvanise much needed rural support for the country's new political leaders, which, in the early years of taking over, needed to dispel a widespread suspicion that it would only care for the ethnic grouping most of them belonged to (Clapham, 2018; Ottaway, 1995). The popularity of MERET's approach subsequently prompted the Ministry of Agriculture to produce a highly detailed, two-part Community-Based Participatory Watershed Guideline in 2005 (Desta et al., 2005; Nedessa and Wickrema, 2010; NC-6; NC-7). Still in use today, this Guideline is championed by the Federal Government as one of the first State-led efforts to empower previously neglected populations (GR-3; MLA-3) and "a foundation for sustainable agricultural development in rural Ethiopia" (Desta et al., 2005: 3).

Today, the Government continues to use the narrative underlying Project 2488 and MERET to justify the primacy of the public works component under the PSNP. At its inception, it rationalised that although the PSNP's immediate purpose would be to smooth the consumption of participating households, applying the Watershed Guideline for the public works would help enhance long-term food security for whole communities (GR-1; GR-3; IC-1; MLA-1; MLA-3). Technical, environmental rehabilitation-focused public works are now a central tenet of the PSNP.<sup>2</sup> As the Programme Implementation Manual for Phase 5 of the programme reiterates, the watersheds and other such 'community assets' developed through the workfare component are precisely what enable the safety net to fulfil its principal *productive* function:

The PSNP is a productive safety net which means that it not only includes a commitment to providing a safety net that protects food consumption and household assets, but it is also expected to address some of the underlying causes of food insecurity and to contribute to economic growth in its own right. The productive element comes from infrastructure and improved natural resources base [sic] created through PSNP public works and from the multiplier effects of cash transfers on the local economy. (FDRE, 2020: p. 18–19).

The PSNP's rapid rise to prominence within Ethiopia's development agenda has consequently not been as a welfarist safety net for its target populations (Lavers, 2019; IC-3; MLA-1; MLA-3; NGO-1). Rather, it is hailed as a major programme tasked with improving Ethiopia's natural resource base and above all, advancing economic growth (FDRE, 2009).

Indeed, as previously discussed, an important part of the new democratic regime's efforts to restore the country's influence on the world stage and legitimise its power domestically involved reducing its dependency on humanitarian aid by seeking long-term solutions to food insecurity and poverty. Since Meles Zenawi's prime ministership, it has looked to the East Asian model of the 'developmental state' – characterised by strong government intervention, regulation and planning – to accelerate economic growth (Clapham, 2018; Gebresenbet, 2014; Lavers, 2019; Vaughan, 2011). In 1993, it introduced a strategy for 'Agricultural Development-Led Industrialisation' (ADLI) which subsequent national development plans have drawn heavily on, based on the premise that surplus agricultural output can fuel industrial sector growth (FDRE, 2002). At the height of its influence in the mid-1990s and 2000s, policies and programmes were implemented to boost the yields of smallholder farmers, through the introduction of extension services, modernised food production practices and technologies (e.g. inorganic fertilisers and improved seeds), and efforts to resettle (willing) households to agriculturally more productive regions (Admassie and Abebaw, 2014; Berhanu and Poulton, 2014; OECD and Institute for Policy Studies, 2020). Though it represents a more nuanced exercise of power by the Federal Government, ADLI is thus certainly reminiscent of the Derg's programme of control over population and land resources (Milman and Arsano, 2014).

ADLI did manage to spur high levels of growth, but was far less successful in reducing food insecurity and chronic poverty (Cochrane and Bekele, 2018; Dejene and Cochrane, 2021); the PSNP reflects a concession by the Government that household consumption and assets needed to be urgently stabilised to meet ambitious productivity goals (Lavers, 2019). Thus, whilst the environmental rehabilitation narrative and the consultative watershed development approach underpinning the PSNP (and MERET before it) would seem to contradict the ADLI's focus on agricultural intensification and highly prescriptive farming practices, they advance it in several ways. First, the rehabilitation of degraded watersheds, in the long-run, would increase the supply of farmable land—which the government frames as an exceedingly scarce resource given Ethiopia's population growth rates (Keeley and Scoones, 2003). Second, the public works employ surplus labour in rural areas, ensuring that this large resource of available labour is productive rather than idle (Vaughan, 2011). Third, the steady, location-based support communities receive, together with the sense of ownership of the watershed they develop through the programme, supports the Government's preference to closely manage the pace of rural–urban migration to coincide with the development of industry sector employment opportunities (Keeley and Scoones, 2003; Lavers, 2017, 2013; MLA-6). In this manner, the highly technical framing of the PSNP's public works obscures the Government's more sensitive political interest to govern over how land is used by rural populations, particularly the poorest amongst them, who represent both a burden and a reserve workforce the State can draw on to accelerate industrialisation and economic growth.

<sup>2</sup> Inspired by the community-based watershed guideline, the Government developed the Pastoral Area Public Works Guideline in 2012, following the PSNP's expansion into the lowland regions (FDRE, 2012). As a result, pastoral context-specific public works also include environmental objectives, such as rangeland and water resource development and rehabilitation, small scale irrigation, and biophysical soil and water conservation, among others (*ibid*).

## 5.2. Governing livelihoods and landscapes to foster green growth

Today, the entrenched development narratives of population pressure on the environment that have shaped the PSNP's public works focus have newfound purpose within Ethiopia's narrative on climate change, which it problematises primarily as a threat to economic growth. This is especially discernible in the Climate Resilience Strategy for Agriculture and Forestry, which serves as a blueprint for subsequent sectoral resilience strategies under the CRGE (FDRE, 2015b). Agriculture and forestry are identified as being among Ethiopia's most vulnerable sectors, "due to their importance to national income and livelihoods" (FDRE, 2015a: 5); besides employing 80% of the population, they make up 43% of GDP and produce nine of the ten largest export commodities, the Strategy states. It warns of loss of agricultural output, lower export earnings and reduced foreign direct investment resulting from weather variability and related hazards – notably, drought, flooding, and soil erosion (FDRE, 2015b). The significant impact of climate change on these sectors and associated costs to the economy, it claims, put the country's "ambition for reaching middle-income status by 2025 at risk" (FDRE, 2015a: 7).

In this narrative, climate change is a threat to growth, but sustaining a healthy economy is also key to protecting the country from this threat. Echoing ADLI, Ethiopia's climate policies underline that strengthened rural development through increased agricultural productivity would continue to fuel growth as well as reduce climate-induced food insecurity nationwide (FDRE, 2015a, 2011a, 2011b, 2007). In fact, they reflect that much of the agriculture sector's work already builds the resilience of Ethiopians (whether or not this is made explicit), ensuring they can contribute to further economic development (FDRE, 2019, 2015a, 2007). This includes such programmes as the PSNP which target the very regions and people most exposed and sensitive to climatic hazards. In other words, agricultural development is a form of adaptation for both the country's economy, its resources, and its population (GR-2; CSO-1; GR-5; GR-7; NGO-2a).

As such, agriculture's characterisation as an 'engine of growth' remains pertinent in Ethiopia's climate vulnerability and resilience discourses. However, economic growth, especially when it is driven by the agriculture and forestry sectors, also results in greenhouse gas emissions—a fact that the Government has had to grapple with to cultivate its image of 'moral climate leader'. The established narrative of environmental degradation has proven instrumental for dealing with this paradox. Ethiopia's NAPA, from the outset, pointed to population pressure on natural resources as a domestic factor that worsens the impacts of climate change on food security and the environment:

...recurrent drought, famine and, recently, flood [sic] are the main problems that affects [sic] millions of people in the country almost every year. While the causes of most disasters are climate related, the deterioration of the natural environment due to unchecked human activities and poverty has further exacerbated the situation. (FDRE, 2007: p. 16).

Such a framing has allowed previous and ongoing work on the environment – including that which is undertaken through the PSNP's public works – to represent further evidence of timely Government action to build the resilience of its large rural population to climate change (FDRE, 2019, 2015a, 2007).

More recently, however, this work has come to reflect Government efforts to harness opportunities presented by climate change for low-carbon growth, and 'maximise the synergies' between adaptation and mitigation (FDRE, 2015a, 2015d, 2011b). The country's Green Economy Strategy identifies livestock, fertiliser use, and deforestation for agricultural land and fuelwood consumption as the major sources of its own current and projected emissions, of which population growth is an underlying driver (FDRE, 2011b). Accordingly, it sets improving agriculture production practices and protecting and re-establishing forests as carbon stocks as two of its four action pillars (FDRE, 2011b). In this manner, the narrative directs attention onto rural populations, whose

livelihoods are problematised as unsustainable as well as vulnerable:

Although considered a climate-related hazard, soil erosion is caused by a mix of socioeconomic and climate factors. [...] Changing farming practices and increasing demand for basic natural resources can result in land-use changes that increase soil erosion (e.g. by reducing vegetation cover).

(FDRE, 2015a: 23).

The population of Ethiopia is expected to increase from 91 million in 2013 to 100 million by 2020, 120 million by 2030 and 145 million by 2050. The projected population increase, urbanisation and income changes are predicted to alter profoundly the prospects for sustained economic development, exert pressure on natural resources and contribute to increases in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

(FDRE, 2015b: 28).

The increased demand on natural resources as a result of population pressure and poor conservation management has strained the functioning of the natural system. The resulting shortage of resources to address basic human needs and the inability of the natural ecosystem to respond threatens people with a high degree of risk and increased vulnerability.

(FDRE, 2019: 21).

Doing so undoubtedly renders the Government's task of building an economy that is both climate-resilient and low-carbon more manageable, because the tools, experience and reserve labour to address environmental degradation already exist in-country. More importantly, the consequences of the Government's own policies to intensify the productivity of the agriculture and forestry sectors are underplayed, leaving the implementation of its growth agenda uncompromised. Interventions that seek to alter and govern how natural resources are accessed and used by the specific sections of the population defined as vulnerable are in this manner rationalised as technically sound and expedient 'win-win' solutions to climate change.

## 5.3. A 'technically climate-smart' PSNP

Ethiopia's climate discourses thus converge neatly with the very narratives of environmental degradation that brought about and shaped the design of the PSNP, further legitimising its programmatic emphasis on public workfare. The PSNP's *immediate* response to (forecasted or unexpected) climatic shocks such as major droughts or extreme rainfall is supposed to be triggered by its contingency mechanism, managed by Ministry of Peace's National Disaster Risk Management Commission in collaboration with the National Meteorological Agency. However, for the stakeholders involved in 'adapting' the PSNP to climate change, what makes the programme truly 'climate-smart' are the actions taken to reduce the impacts of soil erosion in the *long-term* – for both strengthening the resilience of its participants and mitigating climate change (GR-3; GR-4; IC-2; IC-4; NC-3; NC-5). Indeed, the CSI aimed to leverage the public works' 'climate-smartness', by ensuring that climate variability and risks are accounted for through their selection, design and planning phases. According to project outputs, it sought 'low-regret' options for: i) maximizing the programme's contribution in reducing people's vulnerability to climate change; ii) increasing the resilience and sustainability of public work investments in relation to climate change; and iii) enabling them to generate mitigation co-benefits where possible (Lind et al., 2016). Accordingly, the PSNP's contribution to the CRGE is now measured in terms of the percentage of land covered by improved watershed and rangeland management structures and practices, and greenhouse gas emissions sequestered in public works-supported watersheds (FDRE, 2014a). More recent 'climate-smart mainstreaming' work led by the CSM-PSNP does not stray from this technocratic path either; it builds on CSI recommendations by identifying appropriate 'climate-smart' technologies and practices PSNP implementers at the local level can easily draw on, based on location-specific assessments of climatic risks and their differentiated impact on women and men (DR-2;



GR-3; IC-2; IC-4; IC-5; NC-2; NC-3; NC-5).

Efforts to render the programme ‘climate-smart’ thus overwhelmingly focus on adapting the PSNP to biophysical aspects of climate change. A major benefit of this framing is how well it fits with global narratives on climate finance which Ethiopia subscribes to, wherein climate action is to be ‘separate and additional’ from development efforts. Whilst this argument, again, justifiably brings to the fore the role of the industrialised world in causing climate change, the concept of ‘additionality’ instinctively favours responses that are directed at biophysical risks, overlooking the non-climatic, socio-political contexts that equally shape climate vulnerability (Khan and Roberts, 2013; O’Brien et al., 2007). Indeed, even as actors – Government and donor representatives alike – argue that drawing the line between climate action and development is in practice difficult (Sherman et al., 2016), efforts to render the PSNP ‘climate-smart’ have been successfully projected and supported by external consultants, and receive funding that is clearly set apart from the World Bank-managed trust fund that finances the safety net. The CSI even highlighted the potential for Ethiopia to participate in carbon markets, where the PSNP’s environment-focused public works could generate credits for effectively sequestering carbon from the atmosphere (Lind et al., 2016; Woolf et al., 2015; Woolf et al., 2018). As such, there is little doubt that global narratives on climate finance have likewise contributed to shaping and reinforcing ideas and boundaries dictating what a ‘climate-smart’ PSNP entails.

Ultimately, as we have argued in this section, the technical demands of environmental rehabilitation that underpin the PSNP’s public works and their contribution to economic growth have long obscured the State’s more sensitive political interests to govern how increasingly scarce land is used (Hoben, 1996; Keeley and Scoones, 2003; Lavers, 2019, 2017; Milman and Arsano, 2014). Together with the narrative of leadership in the face of a global crisis, Ethiopia’s climate discourses contribute to maintaining the PSNP’s productivist orientation, and thus help perpetuate these politics. Growth-oriented and rights-based approaches to ‘climate-smart’ or ‘adaptive’ social protection are not contradictory or mutually exclusive, and making adjustments to PSNP programming to take into account (biophysical) climate hazards is indeed sensible. Nevertheless, the consequence of such an over-emphasis on growth and climate outcomes is that opportunities for a more rights-based PSNP that could enable rural communities to have more autonomy and control over land resources and rural livelihood choices are neglected or even undermined.

It is true that enhancing resilience through social empowerment and the advancement of rights (including to secure land tenure) is arguably beyond the scope of the PSNP’s original goals. Indeed, as we reflected earlier, the programme was established to prevent famine and reduce chronic food insecurity—which many agree, it has done (Berhane et al., 2014, 2013; Coll-Black et al., 2013; Dasgupta and Robinson, 2021; Knippenberg and Hodinott, 2017). However, the safety net’s longevity cannot be attributed solely to these outcomes. As actors engaged in its design or financing have observed, the PSNP has had to re-invent itself over time, to retain the attention and support of Government and donors alike (DR-1; MLA-1; MLA-3). PSNP-IV, for instance, represented a significant departure from previous phases not least with the removal of a controversial resettlement component (FDRE, 2014a). At the same time, the scale of the programme, its embeddedness within government structures, and the widespread attention it receives within international development circles have made it an ever-attractive instrument through which new policy agendas – like climate change – can be advanced (DR-1; DR-2; GR-1; GR-4; MLA-1; MLA-3; NC-1; NC-3; NGO-1; NGO-2).

We do not argue that pursuing a ‘climate-smart’ PSNP is fundamentally misguided, however. By uncovering the politics behind the technocratic approach decision-makers are favouring, our study encourages reflection about what complementary pathways to building PSNP’s participants’ resilience to climate change such an approach risks foreclosing. One such pathway could begin with aligning the safety net

more strongly with Ethiopia’s rights-based NSPP, for instance. Placing less importance on public works participation to receive support and giving PSNP households greater autonomy over livelihood choices could be another step in this direction, with actions to improve land tenure security for the rural poor as necessary complements to PSNP resource transfers. Challenging the status quo will certainly be difficult, and further research is needed to understand how a rights-based, ‘climate-smart’ PSNP can take shape in practice. This is especially important in such contexts as Ethiopia, where limited resources and capacity mean decision-makers frequently face difficult choices (Cochrane, 2018). But to be socially transformative in the long-run, we argue that climate change presents a need and an opportunity for the programme to deliver more *social* protection, before overburdening the programme with technocratic ‘climate-smart’ adjustments—this is a prerequisite for building the resilience of the very people it intends to benefit (Davies et al., 2013, 2009; Tenzing, 2020; Ulrichs et al., 2019).

## 6. Conclusion

A rights-based approach to ‘adaptive social protection’ holds promise as a policy measure to address structural aspects of vulnerability to climate change such as inequality and marginalisation, yet it has been failing to gain traction over productivist, growth-oriented interventions. Through the lens of Ethiopia’s PSNP, we examined the role of climate discourses in hindering a path towards socially transformative outcomes. We argued that the country’s climate narratives on moral leadership and green growth shape the PSNP’s ‘climate-smart’ evolution. However, they themselves emerged from historically produced and politically driven narratives of modernisation that have long underpinned Ethiopia’s growth-oriented development choices. As a result, the increasingly prominent role played by the PSNP in the country’s climate response, together with the emphasis its ‘climate-smart’ actions place on addressing biophysical aspects of climate risk through public works, perpetuate State efforts to regain influence on the international stage and control how scarce productive land is used.

In conclusion, this case study offers a cautionary lesson about the unintended consequences of climate discourses; they risk diluting rights-based dimensions of social protection, contradicting efforts to address the structural dimensions of vulnerability to climate change. The PSNP is already considered to be a model social protection programme; its experience in adapting to climate change thus has bearing on how the wider ASP agenda takes shape and is cemented in years to come. But while we recognise its ongoing critical role in social protection, we argue that the PSNP’s transformative potential to build resilience to climate change lies in further empowering its participants.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

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