

Accessing the Unconnected: Road Building in West Gojjam, 1950s-2005

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Abstract

Since the 20th century, modern road construction has been staying one of the pressing concerns of successive Ethiopian governments. However, we lack information vis-à-vis the road network expansion and its overall impact. This paper deals with the introduction, expansion and impact of modern road building in West Gojjam. To achieve this, archival documents and secondary sources were consulted. The findings show that modern road construction in West Gojjam was introduced by the Fascist Italy during the period of occupation, 1935/36-1941. But, there was no new road construction throughout the imperial period. Road construction resumed during the military rule. However, it again stalled during the period of the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front/EPRDF/ under study. Financial constraints, lack of trained manpower and the like had greatly impeded the road construction progress across the three regimes. Despite all, the nascent road infrastructure had contributed much to facilitate the socio-economic and political interaction among the people in the region.

Keywords: Rural Road, Highway, West Gojjam, Infrastructure, Historical.



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1. Introduction

Infrastructure is a broad term that stands for a wide range of indispensable amenities such as road, sewerage, bridge, water pipe, fire station, telecommunication, irrigation canal, bank, power supply, education and health institution. Take no notice of overlap; these amenities can roughly be grouped into social, financial and physical infrastructures. While education and health establishments are placed within the basic realm of social infrastructure, banking and related institutions clustered within the financial infrastructure. Road, sewerage, bridge, irrigation canal, water pipe, fire station, transport and communication and power network are categorized within the physical infrastructure.¹

Infrastructures play decisive role in facilitating social, economic, cultural and political developments. Clearly, the boom in economic growth as well as the overall improved living standard and quality of life people enjoy all through the world have been realized by the expansion of an assortment of infrastructures. Yet, infrastructure development, if unguided, inflicts in one way or another socio-economic, cultural, political and environmental costs and endangers development by the same token that it take part in supporting economic growth, meeting basic needs, minimizing poverty, facilitating public mobility and social interaction. This has a need of understanding the long-term perspectives regarding the intents of socio-economic, cultural, political and environmental policies, and the monitoring and organizational setup in which infrastructures are functioning.²

Scholars agree that infrastructure and development affect each other positively. The expansion of infrastructure reinforces the level of development and the latter does in the same way for the enlargement of the former. Therefore, ensuring access to infrastructure of no matter which type is crucial for achieving development and vice versa. However, scholars explain that the correlation is varied in extent from place to place. Besides, the impact of the one over the other is stronger and more visible in the inaccessible or undeveloped regions than in the reachable and developed regions. For example, expanding physical and social infrastructures first to the backward regions is advisable than financial infrastructures. Some infrastructures are indispensable for a certain development sector to start and continue functioning. Bearing in mind these premises, two points need to be considered before an infrastructure is extended to a certain area: the development level and the type of development sector set off in the region.³ So, policy makers and those who are nearest to the issue have to identify first the development level of regions and prior infrastructure establishments before approving plans and initiating construction at a specific localities and/or regions.

Coming to the topic under study, road is one of the decisive infrastructures required for attaining sustainable and wide-ranging development. The ultimate goal of road building is minimizing, if not entirely avoiding, the geographical barrier to travel and enhancing socio-economic, cultural and political interactions at the local, country and even a continent level. In point of fact, the road building venture in Ethiopia did not have nonconforming purposes. This is because the country was inaccessible and

hence viable socio-economic, cultural and political interactions were lacking for long. Theoretically, therefore, road building in Ethiopia has been accomplishing on the bases of lessening the hurdles of travel at a local, provincial and national level so as to ensure socio-economic, cultural and political interactions. However, the earliest works were epitomized by a predilection to political ends. Despite the fact that the post-1855 Ethiopian governments were ambitious enough to bring about an entire development and modernization to their country through introducing and expanding modern expertise and infrastructures, the road building venture seemed to have been carried out primarily from political intention during the earlier period of construction. Governments' road building strategy corroborates this. The first one is the road building strategy of Emperor Tewodros II, the pioneer in introducing modern elements in general and modern road construction in particular. The Emperor's road construction strategy geared towards fulfilling the political intent because his road building agenda aimed at pacifying local rebels by facilitating the movement of the army.⁴ Again, the 1920s and the 1936-1941 Italian occupation period, the two major times in the early history of road building in Ethiopia, witnessed no attempt of prioritizing or considering evenly socio-economic returns.⁵ This trend somewhat began to change since the early 1950s.⁶

Equally important and perhaps the most visible facet of the road building undertaking in Ethiopia is the low-level expansion of the road network. Road building did not make sound progress particularly during the late 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. Putting aside the pre-occupation deadlocks, the road building impasse of the immediate post-liberation imperial period is worthy of mentioning. Since the post-liberation imperial period was a recovery period from the devastating condition of the aftermath of the war, the

restored government devoted all its energy and time in reinstating the pre-invasion political authority and establishing strong central rule. Such a recovery instance did not allow infrastructural development.⁷ It was in the 1950s that the imperial government began to deal with development issues. The government ushered in infrastructure development after founding leading government institutions. Some of these institutions were the Imperial Highway Authority (1951), the Imperial Board of Telecommunication (1952), the Ethiopian Electric Light and Power Authority (1955). The imperial government had also implemented a five - year economic development plan, the first of which gave priority to transport and communication as well as power supply infrastructures. As a result of this; some developments had been registered in the capital and the provincial towns.⁸ Road infrastructure is among those facilities which began to appear in line with the aforesaid government initiatives. This study tries to show the historical development and the subsequent impact of road expansion in West Gojjam.

Before moving to the main subject, it is important to give a clear picture of the spatial scope of the study area, some notes about existing knowledge gap and the temporal landmarks. The geographical area designated as West Gojjam sometime in the past referred to the north western section of the imperial Gojjam *Teqlay Gizat*/the Gevemerate-General of Gojjam/ and the military period Gojjam *Kefele-Hager*/ the Province of Gojjam /. It was established as a political administrative unit towards the late *Derg* period⁹ with the division of the former Gojjam *Kefele-Hager*/the Province of Gojjam/ into three administrative regions namely East Gojjam Administrative Region, West Gojjam Administrative Region and Metekel Administrative Region.¹⁰ However, this administrative division was dissolved and new entities were formed with the rise

of the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front /EPRDF/ into power in 1991. According to the EPRDF ethnic based political administrative arrangement, West Gojjam is placed within the Amhara National Regional State encompassing two Administrative Zones: West Gojjam Administrative Zone and Awi Special Zone.¹¹ This study deals with the history of road infrastructure development and its impact in the former West Gojjam Administrative Region currently encompassing the aforementioned Zones.

Indeed, the former Gojjam Province and the latter West Gojjam Administrative Region are relatively well studied. But, there are no scholarly works on the field of road construction owing to the thematic imbalance of Ethiopian historiography.¹² Consequently, information is lacking not only about the territorial expansion of the road infrastructure but also with regard to the impact it had inflicted upon the socio-economic, political and cultural life of the people in the study area. This study thus tries to uncover the history of road construction and its impact in West Gojjam from 1950s to 2005. The 1950s is made a beginning period for the simple reason that it heralded the onset of a premeditated government engagement on road infrastructure development following the establishment of the Imperial Highway Authority (IHA) in 1951. The concluding year witnessed an all-inclusive reform made as a remedial measure for the development impasse surfaced during the early fifteen years rule of the EPRDF government.¹³

Methodologically, the study based itself on archival documents. Greater attempt was made to confirm the authenticity of archives through cross-checking themselves and with information obtained from secondary sources. Then after, those critically evaluated sources were interpreted logically and presented objectively.

Road Building, 1950s-1974

The introduction of modern road building in West Gojjam predates the establishment of the Imperial Highway Authority /IHA/ in 1951.¹⁴ The first modern road traversing the region was built by the Fascist Italy during the occupation period. It was an extension of the Asmara-Gonder road that stretched out to Addis Ababa through Gorgora, Dangela, Bure and Debre Markos. Nevertheless, the Gonder - Debre Markos-Addis Ababa road was not fully completed. It was epitomized by breaks or unfinished parts.¹⁵

Soon after its establishment, the Imperial Highway Authority (IHA) had initiated consecutive highway construction programs¹⁶ which came up with significant reforms regarding the purpose of road building. Accordingly, road construction was geared not only to political rewards but also to socio-economic returns. This is clearly manifested from the first two road construction programs which in principle targeted at extending roads to the prominent resourceful areas and tourist attraction sites particularly towards historical places.¹⁷ Basically, however, the highway program, as its name indicates, gave due emphasis to the building of cross-country roads that radiate from the capital to the provincial towns.¹⁸ Such a road network failed to connect most of the resource potential and economically important areas. Some were linked with the road system fortunately due to their location lying along the highway that radiates from the capital to provincial centers. True, West Gojjam was connected, despite interludes, by a cross country road that ran from Asmara to Addis Ababa during the period of the Italian occupation. However, throughout the post-liberation imperial period there was no new road built in the region. The only achievement was a plan drawn to build the Dejen-Mota-Bahir Dar and the Bure-Naqemte Highways which traversed part of it. But, both plans remained

futile.¹⁹ The accomplishment of the imperial regime in West Gojjam was, therefore, the “restoration”²⁰ of the Old Italian built road.²¹ This leads to the conclusion that the imperial period was a gloomy point in time vis-à-vis road building in West-Gojjam. Yet, this single line had contributed much in creating a platform for the local community to be acquainted with motor vehicle transport.

Road Building, 1974-1991

A proposal for realizing the Fifth Highway Construction Program in the period from 1973 to 1976 was prepared towards the late imperial period. Nevertheless, the proposal faced serious objection from the planning commission, international lending and assistance agencies, and ministers given that it neglected the building of rural road. Hence, the plan was postponed for a year in anticipation of making the required amendments: the prominent one was incorporating rural road construction. Under this state of affairs, the 1974 revolution erupted and the military government took power.²² The new government came up with imperative amendments on the subject of the imperial road building policy principally pertaining to its strategic emphasis as well as the management and monitoring of the road construction.

The first amendment concerns the reorientation of priorities with respect to the road building. Unlike the imperial regime, the military government prioritized rural road construction. This is noticeable from the Fifth Highway Construction Program (1974-1976) and the Sixth Highway Construction Program (1976-1978). Both Programs had boldly prioritized extending rural road than a highway.²³ Such a shift in focus of attention was done principally with the intention of meeting multi-dimensional goals such as accessing the rural areas, encouraging the growth of agricultural

production and accelerating the processes of monetizing the economy. But, the immediate pushing factor was lack of rural road for transporting food aid and relief supplies to the drought stricken areas.²⁴ True, the 1973-1974 drought and famine clearly showed the serious shortage of rural road on the occasion of striving to save the life of famished communities of the disconnected areas and the urgent necessities of expanding it throughout the country.²⁵

The second area of restructuring is the management and monitoring of the road construction and maintenance tasks. Previously, the management and monitoring of road construction and maintenance had been under the direct guidance of the Imperial Highway Authority/IHA/ office centered at Addis Ababa. Following the shift of emphasis to the building of rural road, the management and monitoring duty was decentralized to different bodies and administrative units. First of all, the responsibility of accessing road infrastructure was bestowed for two entities: the Ethiopian Highway Authority and the Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Department. The first for building and maintaining a highway and the second for rural road as their names indicate. Secondly, soon after the foundation of the Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Department in 1974 under the Imperial Highway Authority, branch offices were established at the provincial centers in charge of planning, construction and maintenance of rural road.²⁶ The Debre Markos Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit, for instance, was inaugurated in 1975²⁷ to put into action the aforesaid duties and responsibilities throughout the then Gojjam province.²⁸ These changes have contributed much in bringing to an end the long time silence of road building in the Province of Gojjam. Following the aforementioned reforms, therefore, the building of modern

roads linking *Awraja* (sub-province) and *Woreda* (district) centers with the provincial capital or the nearest main line was initiated.

Needless to say, ranking road projects is binding since it is impossible to address all areas at a time. Thus, before discussing the road construction progress, it is worthy of forwarding some words concerning the road project selection. As it is mentioned before, road construction in Ethiopia during the *Derg* period was accomplished with the intention of accessing the rural areas, encouraging the growth of agricultural production, accelerating the processes of monetizing the economy and the like. To this end, the authority focused on building RR10, RR30 and RR50 roads which means rural roads having capacity of serving 10, 30 and 50 vehicles per day. Apart from minimizing construction cost and maximizing access to the rural areas, RR10, RR30 and RR50 roads facilitate the movement of people from *woreda* to *woreda*, *awraja* to *awraja* and beyond. In line with this, the Department of Rural Road Construction prioritized those roads linking *woreda*/district centers with a year round main line. Road projects whose construction was suspended due to various reasons, in fact, did not obey the general rule of ranking roads. They were prioritized in every budgeting year with a special case.²⁹ To put in a net shell, the economic, social and political returns of areas were put at the hub of ranking road construction projects.³⁰

The earliest road building undertakings in West Gojjam are the Mankusa-Bir Sheleqo, Durbete-Qunzela and Dembecha-Feres Bet rural roads and part of the Dejen-Mota-Bahir Dar Highway namely the Bahir Dar-Adet section. Each had a distance of 40km, 68km, 51km and 45km, respectively.³¹ Construction had been in progress since the early *Derg* period. However, it was not only too sluggish but also typified by repeated interruption. These weak spots prolonged

the projects' life span for a year and more time. The failure of completing construction work in good time eventually compelled to postpone projects to the next road building program to be precise the Sixth Road Building Program (1976-1978). According to available sources, some road projects were in progress during the Sixth Road Program (1976-1978), too. They had been under construction for about years even after the end of 1978. The building of the Dembecha-Feres Bet road which had remained under construction for about more than six budgeting years is a good case in point.³² Regarding a highway, the building of a section of the Dejen-Mota-Adet-Bahir Dar highway, the Adet-Bahir Dar road, was completed by 1979.³³

The planning and building of rural roads had been on progress in 1980 and all through the 1980s. In 1980, for instance, plan was drawn to construct two rural roads namely the Jiga-Quarit road having a distance of 45km³⁴ and the Wotet Abay-Dageh road that stretched out for a distance of 17 km.³⁵ The Jiga-Quarit road building started by that same year although it was interrupted in a while due to climatic and landscape related problems.³⁶ Construction was completed by 1984 after four budgeting years. Interestingly enough, it was made operative shortly though travel had remained difficult particularly during the rainy season.³⁷ By the summer of 1985, for instance, two bridges situated at Quarit Iyesus *Qebele*, at a specific place called Enechlala were damaged and public transport was interrupted. Quite the reverse, sources are not in a good position to inform us about the construction progress of the Wotet Abay-Dageh road. True, the Ethiopian Road Authority launched the building of the Bure-Naqemte highway that stretched for about 248km length by that same year. Construction was completed within five years timespan by April 1990.³⁸

Three road projects were initiated during the first half of the 1980s. These are the Kessa-Agew Gemja Bet, Tilili-Sekela and Chagni-Wombera roads. The Kessa-Agew Gemja Bet road was built in 1981 by the collaboration of the local community and the Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit.³⁹ However, it was at a dreadful state and in need of immediate maintenance by July 1983. Similar case was reported by April 1990.⁴⁰ The Tilili-Sekela road building had been on progress for two years since 1983. With the completion of construction work, it was opened for traffic by 1985.⁴¹ The building of a new road from Chagni to Wombera was planned by 1984 and construction started by that same year. So far, no information about as to when the Enjibara- Chagni road was extended. This plan certainly informs us that the building of the Enjibara- Chagni road was conducted sometimes before 1984. The new extension, the Chagni-Wombera road construction progressed too slowly and the completion chapter delayed for long. In July 1985, for instance, 20km surveying work was completed. Of this, only 700 meters road was gravel surfaced.⁴² By 1990, construction progressed as far as Dibate⁴³ but interrupted at the same point mainly on account of security problem. Soon, the construction crew was transferred to the Bichena-Quyi road project.⁴⁴

The late *Derg* period too witnessed the planning and building of three rural roads. These include the Bahir Dar-Qunzela, Qunzela- Dingel Ber, and Chageni-Mambuk rural roads. As it has already mentioned before, Qunzela was accessed from Durbete during the early *Derg* period. The construction of the Bahir Dar-Qunzela road, the second line to Qunzela, was progressing well towards the end of 1987. On that same year, a request was made by the Bahir Dar *Awrajja* for opening a new route to Zege, a side road diverging from the Bahir Dar-Qunzela main line and running for a

distance of about 12km.⁴⁵ Beyond Qunzela, a road was on construction to Dengel Ber by 1990.⁴⁶ This road was further extended to Delgi and Aykel towns by that same year by way of campaign. It was built as an alternative route to the main line that linked Gojjam and Gonder for the reason that the latter was blocked or threatened by the EPRDF insurgents.⁴⁷

Though information is lacking about the planning and construction progress of the Chagni-Mankush road, a letter requesting the building of a branch road to Mambuk (a town situated in the then Metekel Administrative Region) reveals that it was operative by March 1990.⁴⁸ The requested spur road diverged from the same line and stretched to the town of Mambuk for about 7km. The local community asked the Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Office to construct it by 1990. The office declined to accept the request mentioning the necessity of planning and allotting a budget in advance in consultation with the Ethiopian Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Department.⁴⁹

So far, I have discussed the histories of rural roads and a highway constructed or planned to be constructed using a grading machine. But, there are also roads that were built manually by the local people and the Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit as the case maybe. To begin with, the rural roads of the Gishe Abay-Adet extended for a distance of 40km, the Gebeze Mariam-Adet having a distance of 30 km, the Feres Bet-Bibugn-Adet (its distance is not mentioned) were built manually by the initiative of the local people.⁵⁰ They linked Sekela, Quarit and Dega Damot *Woradas*/districts/ respectively with the town of Adet. Plan was drawn by 1989 so as to conduct a preliminary study for building them by a grading machine. However, the proposal was failed and construction was postponed to the coming budgeting year.⁵¹

Secondly, roads were built by manual labor but with the budget as well as under the management and monitoring of the Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit. The Dangla-Chara road which was under construction towards the end of 1990 is working example. The local people requested to the Ethiopian Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Department for extending it to Pawi. The latter stated its accord through mentioning the preliminary study made in 1989. It was the shortest road linking Dangla and Pawi through Chara. Sources indicate that the Dangla-Chara-Pawi route shortened the Bahir Dar- Dangla - Chagni-Pawi line by 100km.⁵²

The nature of maintenance work, the crucial element of keeping the wellbeing of road, deserves mention. As a rule, the Debre

Markos Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit incorporated roads within its maintenance program immediately after it received a report from any road project owner about the completion of construction work and the beginning of operation. But, sources consulted for this study confirm that the maintenance work in West Gojjam was minimal. It failed to proceed well mainly due to shortage of equipment like vehicles, tractors, loader etc. The Debre Markos Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit did not have adequate equipment even for the construction brigade. Under the circumstance, the office had taken two remedial measures: executing maintenance work by manual labor and accomplishing it during the summer season when construction is not conducted.⁵³

Table 1. List of roads constructed or planned to be constructed in West Gojjam

No .	Name of Roads	Length in km.	Type of roads	Year of construction commencement	Year of construction completion
1	Mankusa-Bere Sheleqo	40	Gravel surfaced rural road	1975	1978/79
2	Durbete-Qunzela	68	Gravel surfaced rural road	1975	1978
3	Denbecha-Feres Bet	51	Gravel surfaced rural road	1975	1982
4	Bahir Dar-Adet	45	Gravel surfaced highway	1975	1979
5	Enjibara-Chagni	57	Gravel surfaced rural road	Not known	c.1984
6	Jiga-Quarit	45	Gravel surfaced rural road	1980	1984
7	Wotet Abay-Dageh	17	Gravel surfaced rural road	1980	Not known
8	Kessa-Agew Gemja Bet	10	Manually made rural road	1981	1981
9	Tilili-Sekela	35	Gravel surfaced rural road	1983	open for traffic by 1985
10	Chagni-Wombera	160	Gravel surfaced rural road	1984	interrupted
11	Bahir Dar-Qunzela	-	Gravel surfaced rural road	1987	1988
12	Qunzela- Delgi	-	Gravel surfaced rural road	1989	1989
13	Bahir Dar-Qunzela line-Zege	12	Gravel surfaced rural road	1987	Not known
14	Qunzela- Dingel Ber	10	Gravel surfaced rural road	1990	1990
15	Chagni-Mankush	-	Gravel surfaced rural road	Not known	Operative by 1990

16	Chagni-Mankush Line-Mambuk	7	Gravel surfaced rural road	Requested by 1990	Not approved.
17	Bure-Naqemte	248	Gravel surfaced highway	1985	1990
18	Gishe Abay-Adet	40	A dry season earth road	1988	1988
19	Gebeze Mariam-Adet	30	A dry season earth road	1988	1988
20	Feres Bet-Bibugn-Adet	-	A dry season earth road	1988	1988
21	Dangela-Chara	14	A dry season earth road	1990	suspended
22	Chara-Pawi	144	Gravel surfaced rural road	1989 (preliminary study)	Interrupted at planning stage

Source: DMRRCMOA, Ato Addisu Tiruneh, Lä Misraq Gojjam Mestedadere Zone Zena Agelegelot, Folder No.

14, Ref. No. 7/1/መ/ጥ-148/87, Hedar 23, 1987; DMRRCMOA, Kä Bichena Quyi-Debre Markos Project Sera Halafi Lä Gäṭär Mängädoch Wana Asetebabari, 5/1/83; DMRRCMOA, Ato Yohannes Zerihun, Lä Gojjam Keflä Hägär Yä Debre Markos Kätäma Aṭaqalay Mekere Bèt, Folder No.21, Ref. No. 695/4/71, Nähasè 2, 1971.

The road building venture in West Gojjam had inflicted greater impacts. The emerging road network had encouraged the socio-economic, political and cultural intercourse in the bounds of the local community and beyond. It had not only created an opportune moment for the infiltration and expansion of lower level social infrastructures like primary school, local courts, clinics, and so on but also paved the way for the local community to travel long distances for better opportunities. For instance, travel for getting better medication, secondary and higher education, higher court services, religious purity etc. had become frequent. Economically, peasants enabled to transport their products to faraway market centers and in return bring in agricultural inputs like fertilizer, pesticides, and selected seeds.⁵⁴ The road access had also facilitated the foundation and growth of the Ayehu and Ber Sheleko state farms.⁵⁵ Laborers were visiting the state farms including from faraway areas relatively with less difficulty. Though limited in extent, tourist flow to Tis Abay Fall, the Island Monasteries of Lake Tana and other natural and man-made attraction sites was also registered. Politically, the road access had assisted the administration system and attracted the foundation of the Ber Sheleko military training center.⁵⁶ As popular intercourse increased the flow of new ideas and living styles is inevitable. Despite negative impacts, therefore, the local people had benefited much from the flow of progressive ideas and cultures.

The most important point to be mentioned before finalizing our discussion is the public participation on the road infrastructure development. In some areas, peasants stood against an extension of road to their environs mostly fearing the infiltration of alien culture, religion and others. Unlike this, the local community of West Gojjam had actively participated on the road building venture to the extent of influencing the sub-province's development council decision in upgrading roads. The letter of Ato Zemenu Abate corroborates this:

እነዚህ በራስ አነሳሽነትና በየወረዳው የልማት አስተባባሪዎች አመራር በመከናወን ላይ ያሉ የልማት ስራዎች ህብረተሰቡ የሚያጋጥመውን የጤና ችግር በትራንስፖርት መገኘት ለማቃለል እንዲያግዝውና የሚያመርተውን ምርትም ለተሻለ ገበያ ለማቅረብ እድል እንደሚፈጥርለት በማመን የሚያከናውናቸው በመሆኑ...የአውራጃው ልማት ምክር ቤት በመንግስት ዕቅድ ተይዘው በአስተማማኝ ቴክኒካዊ አመራርና

ማቴሪያል በገጠር መንገድ ስራ ፕሮጀክት ወይም በግብርና ሚኒስቴር የገጠር ልማት እራስ አገዝ ፕሮግራም እንዲሰሩ ወስኗል።⁵⁷

These development works currently accomplished by the initiative of the local people and the order of the woreda's development coordinators are believed to have assisted the society to solve its health problem by making ease access to transport and provide opportunity to take his products to the market..... Thus, the awrajja development council had decided these development works to be part of the government program and made with better technical and material supply of the Rural Road Construction Project or by the Ministry of Agriculture Rural Development Program.

To sum up, the *Derg* reign was a remarkable period in the history of road construction in West Gojjam. Despite construction delay and interruption, the period saw the building of several roads. Accordingly, all *awrajja*/sub-province/ and the majority *woreda*/district/ centers were linked with the provincial capital, Debre Markos, by an all-weather road. It was really a great success seen in relation to the war economy of the *Derg* regime. The impact of the nascent road network on the socio-economic and political interaction in the region and beyond was noteworthy.

Road Building, 1991-2005

Unlike the military government which did much in expanding and maintaining roads in West Gojjam, the Ethiopian People Revolution Democratic Front (EPRDF) government paid no attention during the first decade and a half of its rule. The transitional government (1991-1995) had blatantly paid no heed to the road construction in Gojjam. There are two indications to this. Firstly, instead of boosting the material and human resource capacity of the Debre Markos Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit, the EPRDF government confiscated the office's property. This is evidenced from the letter of the Debre Markos Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit.

የጎጃም ክፍለ ሐገር ገጠር መንገዶች በአዲሱ መዋቅር የሚያካልለው የምስራቅና የምዕራብ ጎጃምን መተክልን ጨምሮ ዘጠኝ የጥገና መስመሮች ሲኖሩን ለዚሁም አህአዴግ ጎጃምን በቁጥጥሩ ሥር ከማዋሉ በፊት ስድስት የአፈር ገልባጭ መኪኖች፤ አምስት ትንንሽ የመስክና የሰራተኛ ሰርቪስ አገልግሎት ሰጪ መኪኖች እንደነበሩን ይታወቃል። ሆኖም ግን በአሁኑ ጊዜ ከነበሩን አፈር ገልባጭ መኪኖች አራቱ እንዲሁም ሁለት ትንንሽ መኪኖች በአህአዴግ የተወሰዱበትን ሲሆን አሁን የአሉንን ዘጠኝ የጥገና መስመሮች የምናንቀሳቅሰው በምስራቅና በምዕራብ ጎጃም በማዘዋወር በሁለት አፈር ገልባጭ መኪኖች ብቻ ሲሆን ባለብን የትማ እጥረት ከ450 ኪ.ሜ በላይ የጥገና መስመሮች ለመጠገን ከእቅድ ጋር ለመራመድና ለማከናወን አልቻልንም።⁵⁸

The Gojjam province Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit which incorporates East Gojjam and West Gojjam including Matekel with the new political administrative arrangement has nine maintenance lines; and it is known that we had six loader and five small vehicles using for both field work and transporting workers before EPRDF brought Gojjam under its control. Nevertheless, of all our vehicles EPRDF took four loaders and two small cars; so we are repairing our nine maintenance lines only using two loaders, moving them to East Gojjam and West Gojjam. Plus to this, we are unable to accomplish and go on with the plan in maintaining more than 450km of road due to the shortage of tyre.

The second deterring action of the EPRDF government is the attempt to take the office's crusher from Debre Markos town perhaps to Tigray. It was failed with an ardent public opposition.⁵⁹ The third manifestation of the less emphasis given to the road infrastructure development in West Gojjam during the early EPRDF period is the minimum budget allocated for the sector. A report from the Gojjam Province Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit shows that the budget allocated for the road maintenance work planned to be made in the whole Gojjam province in the 1992/1993, 1993/1994, 1994/1995 fiscal years was 486,565; 852,547, and 144, 870.80 *birr* respectively. This budget was too small and inadequate for planned works. Consequently, there was no significant road infrastructure improvement registered in West Gojjam in the ensuing years of EPRDF's accession into power in 1991. The major achievements include the roads built by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Rural Development, the completion and upgrading of the Dangela-Chara road and the building of three shorter roads by the Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit.

The Ministry of Agriculture and the Rural Development built three rural roads namely the Bure-Shindi-Wogedad, Dembecha-Wad Iyesus, and Gemeja Bet-Chagni roads during the early EPRDF period. To begin with, the construction of the Bure-Shindi-Wogedad road having a distance of 36 km. was progressing throughout the 1994 and completed by June, 1995.⁶⁰ The Dembecha-Wad Iyesus and Gemeja Bet-Chagni roads extended for a distance of 18km. and 19km. respectively. Construction was completed by 1994. The construction cost of these roads was covered by the government and the local community. All were under the Bure Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Section for upkeep since April 1994. But, no maintenance work was done for a year that is up to April 1995.⁶¹

The building of the Dangela-Chara road was initiated before 1991 but remained futile for long. It was constructed manually in 1994.⁶² However; in May 1995 it was functioning without significant improvement work done than before. Despite this, it had won the positive opinion of observers by the same year.⁶³ Apart from the aforementioned four rural roads; a spur road that ran from Gemja-Bet to Azena was built during the first decade of the EPRDF rule.⁶⁴

The Rural Road Construction and Maintenance Unit which was established by the military government at the provincial level had greatly assisted the road construction and maintenance task. But, it was not adequate for such a wider province. The absence of adequate local agencies had seriously affected the managing and monitoring of the building and maintaining work throughout the military regime and the early EPRDF period as well. The EPRDF government dealt with solving the aforementioned problem only a decade and some years after it took power in 1991. In fact, it decentralized the road building work and established a road office at regional level by October 1993.⁶⁵ But, the Amhara Region Road authority established an additional road construction and maintenance section at Dangela only later in April 2001. The new section was transferred to Bure a year later.⁶⁶

Following the establishment of the additional section, two new road construction projects were endorsed in West Gojjam. These were the Jiga-Maksegnit road having a distance of 22km and the Chagni-Zigem road whose length is not indicated. Information available regarding the Jiga-Maksegnit road building is about the surveying work plan that was requested to be done by January 1994.⁶⁷ The Chagni-Zigem road construction was completed and submitted to the Gojjam Rural Road Maintenance Unit by July 2001.⁶⁸



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Table 2. List of Roads Constructed and Maintained

No .	Name of the road	Length in km.	Type of work done	Year of construction commencement	Year of construction completion
1	Dangela-Chara	14	Dry season earth road	1992	1994
2	Dembecha-Wad Iyesus	18	Gravel surfaced rural road	1993	1994
3	Bure-Shindi-Wogedad	36	Gravel surfaced rural road	1993	1995
4	Gemeja Bet-Chagni	19	Gravel surfaced rural road	1993	1994
5	Jiga-Maksegnit	22	Gravel surfaced rural road	Survey work,1994	Not known
6	Chagni-Zigem	-	Gravel surfaced rural road	Survey work, 1994	2001
7	Gimja Bet-Azena	12	Gravel surfaced rural road	1998	1999

Source: DMRRCMOA, *Ato Getahun Joba Lā Me'irab Gojjam Mesetadader Zone Tehfāt Bèt*, Folder No. 19, Ref. No.7-7-86/86, Nāhasè, Tir,30, 1986; DMRRCMOA, *Ato Tsehay Tegegne, Lā Meseraq Gojjam Asetädadäre Akababi Tehfāt Bèt*, Miyaziya, 24, 1984.

Conclusion

Road construction was introduced in West Gojjam in the second half of the 1930s by the Fascist Italy. The first road was the Gonder-Debre Markos-Addis Ababa road. The post-liberation imperial period witnessed no newly built road in West Gojjam. In contrast, the *Derg* government had not only introduced rural road building but also constructed lengthy rural roads that connected almost the majority *Woreda* and all *Awraja* centers with the provincial capital, Debre Markos, and beyond Gojjam with the neighboring provinces. The EPRDF period under discussion, however, did not witness significant achievement on the field.

Since the road infrastructure development started from a grassroots level, its impact was not only visible but also gainful. The road construction in West Gojjam no doubt had facilitated the socio-economic, political and cultural interaction of the people within the region and beyond. Several new trade centers were opened and the market economy was encouraged. Somewhat public mobility had become frequent. Yet, the absence of an effective and efficient maintenance work had stifled the road service and then the emerging socio-economic interaction. Moreover, the road network did not penetrate much of the rural areas of the region and thus the rural *qebeles* had not been connected with a reasonable access to road.

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End Notes

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