



POLICY BRIEF (2023)

Youth Migration: Policy Options for Development in Ethiopia

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BACKGROUND

With an estimated population of about 125 million in 2023, Ethiopia is the second-most populous country in Africa next to Nigeria. Its youth population (age 15-29) accounting for more than 28% of the population in 2020 is fast growing, creating the youth bulge. This group of the population ignites an opportunity for economic development if provided with the required education, training and jobs that cater to their individual needs and challenges. However, the country is confronted with a daunting problem of youth unemployment which may reduce the deployment of this invaluable economic asset. This situation, wittingly or unwittingly, tempers the youth to opt for migration.

Youth migration, whether internal or cross-border, often brings multiple socio-economic, physical and psychological problems. It is not migration by itself, but rather the context (such as policies and laws) under which migration takes place that defines the opportunities and challenges of migration. In light of this, systematic consideration of existing migration-related policies and legal frameworks in Ethiopia is required to generate pieces of evidence for policy dialogue and advocacy to assist the government in effectively managing migration and utilizing it for development.

NATURE AND MAGNITUDE OF YOUTH MIGRATION IN ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia is a country where migration of all kinds—internal and external, regular and irregular, and temporary and permanent—exists where youths are more likely to migrate compared to other population groups. However, attempts made to document the magnitude of the various migratory kinds are thwarted by a lack of comprehensive and updated national-level migration data. Pieces of data from the Ethiopia Statistics Service (ESS) provide some evidence on both internal and international migration and reveal that internal migrants contributed to 11.4% of the population in 1984 which increased to only 17.1% in 2021 (Fig 1) making the country stands at the lowest level of internal migration even by Sub-Saharan standard.

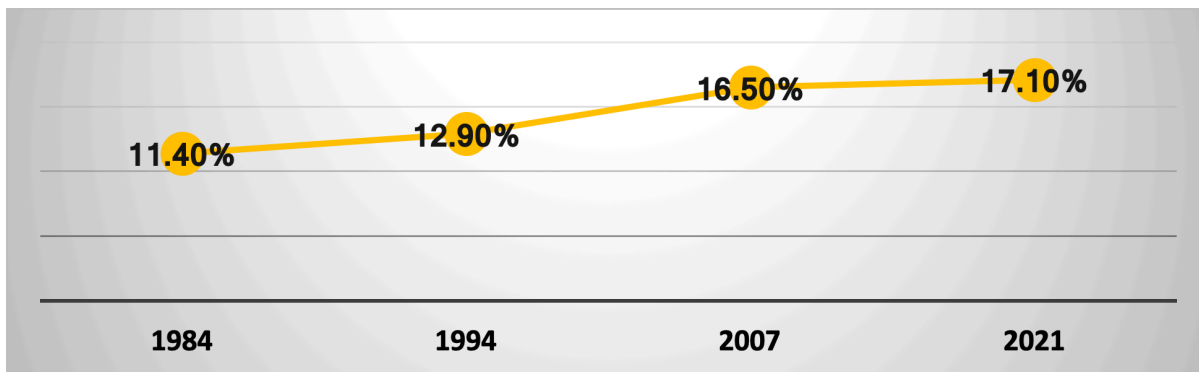


Fig 1: Share of migrants from the total population across time

Rural-rural migration contributed the largest share to internal migration up until 2021 which began declining thereafter. On the other hand, the share of rural-urban migration has increased and more recently exceeded other types of internal migration (Fig 2). Empirical findings also show that temporary labor migration between rural areas and from rural to urban areas are common practices in Ethiopia.

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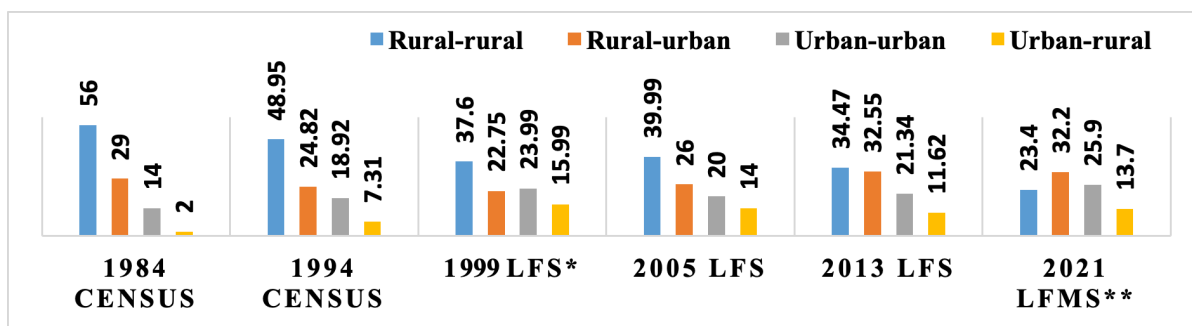


Fig 2: The share of each type of migrant from overall internal migrants across time

*LFS: Labor Force Survey; ** LFMS: Labor force and Migration Survey



KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- In Ethiopia, socioeconomic constraints and high rates of youth unemployment and underemployment are the main push factors behind youth migration.
- Youth migration in Ethiopia brings several hardships to migrants with various socio-economic implications. For example, rural-urban migrants face one or more challenges of abuse, unemployment, human trafficking, poor housing and living conditions, high living costs, unstable food supplies, low-paid labor, difficulty obtaining an identity card, and confiscation and eviction from workplaces.
- Apart from the challenges migrants face, migration has implications for migrant-receiving areas. With internal migration, rural-rural migration from highland to lowland areas of Ethiopia which occurs without supportive institutional contexts results in inter-ethnic conflict at destinations.

The recent estimate by ESS (excluding the Tigray region) reveals that the international migrant stock of Ethiopia was 839,224 where Saudi Arabia was the main destination (31%). South Africa, the U.A.E, the United States and Yemen are other key destinations. Between 2008/2009 and 2013/2014, about 480,480 Ethiopians legally migrated mainly to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and U.A.E. More than 95% of these migrants are female. However, most overseas labor migrants use irregular migration routes to the Middle East, South Africa, or Sudan en route to Europe.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF YOUTH MIGRATION

Migration is one of the major development issues of the contemporary world. It happens in a wide range of spatial and temporal contexts for a variety of reasons with a multitude of impacts. In Ethiopia, socioeconomic constraints and high rates of youth unemployment and underemployment are the main push factors behind youth migration. Conversely, the growing need for housemaids in major cities of Ethiopia and the Middle East, the demand for daily laborers in urban centers and cash crop growing areas, the prospects of informal self-employment in urban areas and the availability of relatively abundant agricultural land in lowland areas of the country are widely mentioned pull factors of migration.

Youth migration in Ethiopia brings several hardships to migrants with various socio-economic implications. For example, rural-urban migrants face one or more challenges of abuse, unemployment, human trafficking, poor housing and living conditions, high living costs, unstable food supplies, low-paid labor, difficulty obtaining an identity card, and confiscation and eviction from workplaces. Similarly, rural-rural migrants are exposed to labor exploitation, conflicts and inadequate access to water, food, and healthcare at destinations. International irregular migrants are exposed to physical, psychological, and/or sexual abuses or exploitations by smugglers or traffickers. There is also an incidence of violent detention of migrants, being held as hostages for payment of a ransom, bonded labor, sexual violence against women and in some cases being sold into slavery. Migrants are also vulnerable to dehydration, starvation, degrading treatments and loss of lives while trying to cross the Gulf of Aden or the Mediterranean Sea by boat.



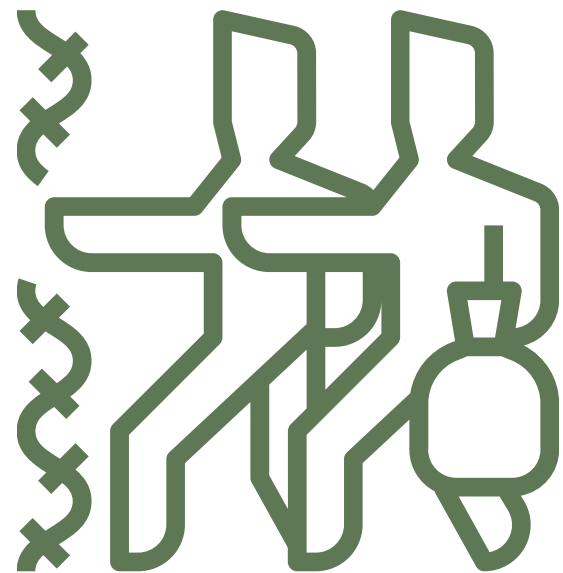
Apart from the challenges migrants face, migration has implications for migrant-receiving areas. With internal migration, rural-rural migration from highland to lowland areas of Ethiopia which occurs without supportive institutional contexts results in inter-ethnic conflict at destinations. Rural-urban migration puts pressure on urban service provision, urban unemployment and the growth of slums and informal settlements given the limited financial, human and institutional capacity of urban centers of Ethiopia to address migration-related challenges. Migrants contribute about 44% of the urban population of Ethiopia and unemployment is significantly higher among migrants in urban destinations (84%) than in rural destinations (16%).

Additionally, there is a transfer of vulnerability from destination/transit areas to the migrant-sending households and places in various forms. When migrants are exposed to violence, detention, deportation, health shocks, etc., migrant-sending households and places are also affected by declining or absence of remittances. Migrant-sending households are also in debt when migrants fail to support their households to pay back the loan taken to sponsor migration. In line with this, remittances that migrant-sending households receive declined with the travel ban to the Gulf States and the increase in return migration primarily from Saudi Arabia. The same decline occurred with a decline in internal migration and the rise of internal return migration due to inter-ethnic conflict prevailing in the country.

The challenges migrants face and related outcomes are the function of multiple factors. One of these factors is related to the fact that the majority of youth migrants at their destination tend to participate in low-paid work (e.g. domestic work, daily labor) or self-employed work (like street vending) in informal sectors. Participation of migrants in the informal sector is related to their low financial resources, education, entrepreneurial skills, social network and experience. The informal sectors in Ethiopia are often unstable and low-paying and lack institutional protection which makes migrants vulnerable. Here, the influx of youth migrants with limited education and skills tends to have long-term socioeconomic implications not only for migrants but also for migrant-sending and receiving areas at large. In this regard, the unwelcome attitude of the government towards both rural-rural and rural-urban migration and the lack of effective intervention on international migration tend to play important roles in the hardships migrants face. What is more, the absence of institutional support for the protection of the rights of migrants in many destination/transit countries contributes to the vulnerability of overseas migrants.

Notwithstanding the multiple hardships associated with youth migration, there exist some opportunities. Internal migrants, for instance, are found content with their urban life in terms of better income, food, clothes and personal freedom. Although there are some documented consequences of migration in creating labor scarcity at origin that lead to the feminization of agriculture, it is widely noted that migration is important for the livelihood of migrant-sending households through lessening the pressure on the meagre resources of households and bringing income to smooth consumption and asset accumulation. Nonetheless, there is limited remittance from rural-urban migrants due to low income and high living costs in cities. On the other hand, remittance amounts from overseas migration are greater than those from internal migration and could help migrant-sending households improve housing conditions, smooth consumption and invest in agricultural activity, non-farm business and education.

Put briefly, the living and working conditions of migrants influence not only individual earnings, well-being and career prospects but also the livelihood of migrant-sending households and possibly the development processes of migrant-sending countries at large. Observably, migrant-sending country-specific policies and legal frameworks can serve as important instruments in shaping the outcomes of migration.



CURRENT MIGRATION RELEVANT GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND LAWS

Ethiopia has no comprehensive migration policy so far, that can assist in managing youth migration. A clear migration policy helps in setting a government position and orients actors' engagement to change migration challenges, exploit migration opportunities, and link migration to local, national and regional development. Of course, Ethiopia has labor migration-related policies and legislations dispersed in various policy and legislative frameworks. The important ones are the Proclamation on Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Person and Smuggling of Migrants (Proclamation No1178/2020) and the Proclamation on Ethiopia's Overseas Employment (Proclamation No 923/ 2016) , which was later amended by Proclamation No 1246/2021. All were designed mainly to prevent irregular migration and protect overseas migrants.

Efforts being made to put in place legislation can be taken as a good achievement, but the challenges that Ethiopian youth migrants face cannot be reduced to the expected level. The main caveat is largely associated with changing legislation into practice. In general, the following key factors militate against the effectiveness of the proclamations: **1) Lack of comprehensive migration policy.** Despite Ethiopia's commitment to implement the global UN development agenda of managing migration and integrating migration into development policies and programs, policy interventions so far lag behind the prevailing dynamics and realities of migration; **2) The current distribution of some migration management responsibilities among several offices in an unsystematic manner with no migration lead agency.** A lack of coordination and systemic efforts causes migrants to suffer and the government to miss opportunities from migration; **3) There is a concern about the influence of the dearth of skilled human power and resources and the absence of good governance on the application of the laws; and 4) No adequate capacity building training to improve skills** that enables migrant workers secure employment in less vulnerable form of overseas employment opportunities.

Regarding internal migration, the only migration-related policy that explicitly shows the position of the government towards¹⁶ migration is the 1993 population policy of Ethiopia. It contains two key migration-related policy objectives: the first is to reduce rural-urban migration and the second is to ensure spatially balanced population distribution. The first policy objective shows unwelcome attitudes of the government that are likely to discourage measures toward addressing the challenges migrants face at their destination. Concerning balanced population distribution, the policy is more likely to be unattainable in the context of the ethnic-based system of administration.

Ethiopia also has several non-migration-specific policies and legal frameworks relevant to migration though with no consistent orientation towards migration. While some encourage migration, others discourage it. Still, some do not entertain migration issues at all even if they are expected to do so. The following are the key migration-relevant policies and laws:

- **Federal and regional constitutions:** The federal constitution provides citizens the 'right to freedom of movement' and the 'right to engage freely in economic activity and pursue a livelihood of his choice anywhere within the national territory'. However, it contradicts regional constitutions. For instance, the constitution of the Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State,⁷ (BGNRS) notes that although the region contains various ethnic groups such as Gumuz, Berta, Mao, Komo, Shinasha, Amhara, Oromo and Agew, the region belongs to the first five ethnic groups. The last three and other ethnic groups are simply recognized in terms of their presence⁸. Thus, those ethnic groups who migrate from their respective region to BGNRS¹⁸ are not entitled to free rural land access rights at their destination. The Federal Constitution also appears contradictory to the land policy of the country regarding internal migration. Although the constitution allows the free movement of people, the land policy implicitly discourages rural people from settling permanently and using the land, otherwise, they are subjected to losing the land upon out-migration.



- **Development Plans:** The Growth and Transformation Plans (GTPI19 and GTPII)²⁰ say nothing about migration as a development agenda while these development plans are expected to be instruments by which labor migration can be aligned with national development goals and sectoral policies.
- **Sectoral policies, strategies and plans:** Sectoral policies such as the Youth Policy, Labor Proclamation and National Social Protection Policy distance²² themselves from youth labor migration issues even though youth labor migrants are vulnerable groups that need labor protection. More recent policies, strategies, and plans, on the other hand, have begun to acknowledge the importance of migration management for better employment creation for the youth. These include a Plan of Action for Job Creation, National Employment Policy and Strategy, and Rural Job Opportunity Creation Strategy. Despite²⁵ such welcome approaches, these policies are not²⁶ adequately put into practice due to a lack of comprehensive migration policy and legal initiatives that promote migration.

b) Comprehensive migration policy: A long-time attempt being made to produce a migration policy for the country has remained without result. Migration policies and interventions need to be comprehensive enough to take into account different forms of migration. Therefore, specific types of migration-oriented proclamations, regulations, and directives that can be translated into enforceable laws are important.

c) Integrate migration issues into sectoral and non-sectoral policies: Besides working towards developing a comprehensive migration policy, it is also critical to integrate or mainstream migration issues into various relevant sectoral policy objectives, implementation, and evaluation as migration is under the influence of non-migration policies. It is also important to maintain links and address the inconsistencies of policies and laws towards migration.

d) Migration management lead agency: Currently, some migration administration responsibilities are distributed among several offices in an unsystematic manner with no migration management lead agency. Given the scale of migration-related problems and potential for development, the establishment of a well-organized and well-funded migration management structure with a migration management lead agency is a preponderance for today's Ethiopia.

e) Improved data collection & dissemination: The breadth and depth of migration data in the country are insufficient to inform the emerging policy issues. As migration data demand cannot be satisfied by census and surveys alone, relevant stakeholders need to work together in collecting and disseminating continuous administrative records to feed the policy issues. To that end, it requires establishing an effective system of migration data management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the prevailing challenges and potential benefits accompanying youth migration in Ethiopia, the need for well-informed interventions is unequivocal. Accordingly, the following directions are suggested as recommendations to assist attempts for migration management in the country:

a) Employment creation: As both the origin and destination of migrants are interrelated in many respects, it is important to create decent job opportunities in both places. In rural areas, this includes investing in farm and non-farm employment creation through rural industrialization, entrepreneurship, development of irrigation projects, and provision of social services and infrastructure, among others. In urban areas, investing in job creation through entrepreneurship, attracting investment and expanding manufacturing industries are among the important measures. Ethiopia faces both educated and uneducated youth unemployment. Overcoming this necessitates, among others, investing in youth education and skill development and matching education to the demand on the job market. Supporting migrants to acquire the essential skills before their migration helps minimize the risks and maximize the benefits of migration.



CONCLUSION

Given a growing youth population with limited employment opportunities in Ethiopia, migration can be one of the means for harnessing the benefits of youth bulge through effective migration management. However, currently, youth migration is accompanied by multiple challenges while institutions and their interventions are far behind in living up to their expected roles in effectively managing migration and enabling the country to harness the benefits of its young population. This situation needs to be reversed through comprehensive, informed, systematic, and immediate responses to redress the attending challenges and seize the opportunities created by the imminent youth migration.



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