

# Migration and COVID-19 in context: Labor migration in Ethiopia and its implications for policy responses

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The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically affected global mobility since its outbreak in early 2020. It has taken the lives of millions and led to wholesale changes at all levels in the way people interact, move and work. By mid-March 2022, at least 476 million people had contracted the infection, and some six million died from COVID-19 (WHO 2022). Among those most affected by the pandemic have been migrants,

often from communities that were already vulnerable due to having limited economic, social and other resources at their disposal to be able to establish resilience and overcome shocks to household livelihoods. This brief examines the effects of COVID-19 on labor migration in Ethiopia as well as the government's responses to these effects and their implications.



Open market in Chencha, Ethiopia (photo: Mengistu Dessalegn).



## Reverse migration of Ethiopian migrants

One of the first major impacts of the pandemic was return migration. Following the outbreak in the first half of 2020, many Ethiopian migrants returned home from countries around the Persian Gulf, in the Middle East and other nearby regions. Recorded information indicates that over 58,000 migrants returned to Ethiopia from April 2020 to mid-2021 (IOM 2021). This reverse migration was largely non-voluntary, the outcome of either forced expulsion or distress return due to loss of livelihood. For example, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) deported thousands of Ethiopian migrants to Addis Ababa following the outbreak, ostensibly because of suspected coronavirus transmission among them (Endeshaw and Paravicini 2020; UNCDF 2020; Getachew 2020). This significant deportation of migrants was on account of both a misunderstanding of the pandemic itself and a misrepresentation of migrants as potential disease transmitters, which exacerbated stigmatization and fueled xenophobia and discrimination (United Nations 2020a, 2020b).

In some cases, the economic impact of the pandemic in destination countries forced many migrants to take this difficult decision themselves as they faced a loss of livelihood and a lack of alternative employment. In Lebanon, for example, the already deteriorating economic situation was made worse by the pandemic. Many employers stopped paying their Ethiopian workers and threw them out with no support (Rose 2020; Ethiopian Monitor 2020; El Deeb 2020). In particular, vulnerable young Ethiopian women working as domestic workers in middle-class households were left stranded outside the Ethiopian embassy in Beirut and had to seek assistance to return home. The Ethiopian

government eventually repatriated them back home (ENA 2020; Borkena 2020). The forced deportations from some Persian Gulf countries as well as distress returns from Lebanon demonstrated the acute vulnerability of migrants to health crises and associated economic insecurity, reprising some of the effects of previous events such as the 2008 global financial crisis, which revealed how vulnerable migrants could be to job loss and/or non-payment of wages (United Nations 2020b).

## Impact on livelihoods and remittances

As many Ethiopian migrants lost their jobs in the destination countries, their remittances dwindled (Samuel 2020; Manaye 2020; United Nations 2020b; IOM 2020a), which significantly affected the livelihoods of families dependent on them. Where migrants were forced to return home, such as from the Middle East, an abrupt return meant a loss of livelihood for them as well their families back home. Remittances play a significant role in Ethiopia's economy by providing a vital source of foreign exchange (Isaacs 2017). Data from the National Bank of Ethiopia indicate that remittances officially transferred reached USD 5.2 billion in 2018/19, double that year's total export earnings of USD 2.6 billion (NBE 2020). In fiscal year 2019/2020, these official remittances declined 19% to USD 4.2 billion (NBE 2020).

## Responses

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, the Ethiopian government took a number of measures, particularly during March and April 2020. These included school closure, border closure, a mandatory 14-day quarantine for travelers, a state of emergency, a ban on large gatherings and a ban on



Working group at a meeting on migration in Arba Minch, Ethiopia, November 2019 (photo: Alan Nicol).

overcrowding in public transportation (Ethiopian Health Data 2020). While these were general measures in response to the pandemic, some of them directly or indirectly impacted migrants and migration processes.

The ban on movement of people across borders, aimed at preventing the spread of the virus (Ethiopian Health Data 2020), immediately brought official out-migration to a halt. This was observed particularly along the eastern migration route linking the Horn of Africa with the Gulf of Aden and the Middle East (MMC 2020; Rodríguez 2020). Border closures and movement restrictions by governments led to many migrants being stranded (IOM 2020b) with at least 3,000 stuck in the region by the end of September 2020 (IOM 2020c). The situation further endangered migrants as crossing land borders is invariably designated “illegal”, which carries the risk of arbitrary detention. In some cases, migrants were stranded in conflict-affected areas, including Yemen (United Nations 2021).

Travel restrictions such as flight suspensions also affected movement. Ethiopian Airlines suspended flights to more than 30 destinations (Ethiopian Airlines 2020; New Business Ethiopia 2020) including countries in the Middle East and Persian Gulf which are major migration destinations for Ethiopians. The impact of flight suspensions on overseas labor migration was compounded by entry restrictions imposed in several destination countries. For example, Saudi Arabia placed entry restrictions on travelers from Ethiopia and a number of other countries (Zelalem 2020).

These challenges proved particularly difficult as the Ethiopian government had only lifted its ban on overseas labor migration in 2018 (Dessalegn 2019; Dessalegn et al. 2020). Movement of domestic workers to Gulf countries had resumed in August 2019, just months prior to the COVID-19 outbreak (ENA 2019a, 2019b). Lifting the ban was a response to the acute need in Ethiopia for jobs abroad and remittances, which shore up major sectors of the economy. These conditions that precipitate labor migration and the contexts that generate demand for labor migrants continue. Interviews conducted with relevant office holders at the Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs indicate that even during the pandemic, Ethiopia had resumed sending labor migrants, particularly domestic workers, to some countries in the Middle East, notably the UAE, Qatar and Jordan, where bilateral labor agreements were already in place.

This resumption of labor migration during the COVID-19 pandemic brought in new protocols, including pre-departure health screening. Migrants now have to get tested for COVID-19 before leaving Ethiopia and carry a certificate indicating a negative COVID-19 test. Travel and entry regulations in force in the destination countries also require travelers to have a pre-departure COVID-19 test and carry proof of a negative result.

## Reintegration of returnee migrants

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, previous cases of a sudden mass return of migrants—for example, the mass deportations from Saudi Arabia from 2013 to 2014—presented considerable challenges to the Ethiopian government. In the absence of a national reintegration framework, the process of reintegrating returnee migrants has proved difficult (Dessalegn 2019). The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs have been involved in efforts to support the reintegration of returnees (ILO 2019). Current efforts have been complicated by the pandemic and its associated risks of spreading and contracting the disease.



Sign in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, August 2018, warning people about people trafficking (photo: Alan Nicol).

Ethiopian government responses during the pandemic have focused mainly on enforcing quarantine measures. In March 2020, the government imposed a mandatory 14-day quarantine for travelers (Ethiopian Health Data 2020) under which returning migrants were escorted directly to quarantine centers (ECC 2020). Supported by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the government’s quarantine facilities provided food and non-food items, personal protective equipment and medical care to returning migrants during their stay (IOM 2020c, 2020d). The challenges reported in such centers have included a lack of proper waste management and water supply, electricity interruption, inadequate hygiene, lack of social workers, inadequate physical distancing and a lack of sufficient orientation for returnees (ECC 2020).

At present, ILO, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, and other relevant government agencies coordinate and facilitate the passage of migrants from quarantine centers to their home areas (IOM 2020d). However, successful social reintegration is difficult due to the migrants’ sudden loss of livelihoods. Many of them have



A young woman in Arada, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, June 2019 (photo: Alan Nicol).

returned home empty-handed and with low self-esteem (Wuilbercq 2020). Returning home with unfulfilled expectations, broken dreams and a loss of income that may actually exacerbate family debt can generate further social stigma for the returnees.

COVID-19 has also affected job opportunities within Ethiopia. An assessment in March 2020 by the Jobs Creation Commission indicated that the pandemic had already negatively impacted jobs and incomes in the manufacturing, construction and service sectors (Jobs Creation Commission 2020). Pandemic-induced job losses and shrinking economic activity within the country could, therefore, pose further challenges for economic reintegration. Efforts by the Jobs Creation Commission in response to the impact of COVID-19 include job protection facilities for factory workers in industrial parks.<sup>1</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected rural-urban migration processes within Ethiopia. The impact of the pandemic triggered a reverse migration in which migrants working in urban areas returned to their rural areas of origin. In interviews conducted in the field by the AGRUMIG project in rural Gamo in southern Ethiopia in December

2020 and March 2021, many farmers reported that migrants had returned due to loss of jobs and incomes in the urban areas. The returnees interviewed in rural areas confirmed this development, indicating that they had to return as they had lost their incomes due to the COVID-19 crisis. People in the Gamo highlands have long practiced rural out-migration as a livelihood strategy, working in the traditional weaving industries in towns. Pandemic-induced impacts, including movement restrictions, closure of businesses, declining demand for products and falling prices, as well as the increased cost of raw materials, have all resulted in a loss of jobs and income for migrants. Further, the return of these migrants to rural areas created intense pressure on already meagre household resources.

For some rural households, the sudden return of migrants was a double blow: It meant the loss of vital remittance income, and it also entailed more people to feed—always a challenge given their limited household resources. These interviews also revealed that reverse migration from urban to rural areas created social tensions among returnees and between them and other rural residents because of loss of income, competition for limited resources and the frustrations of a sudden change in life circumstances.

<sup>1</sup>See <https://jobscommission.gov.et/researches-and-publications-on-impacts-of-covid-19/>



Young men in a rural Gamo village in Ethiopia preparing weaving thread (photo: Mengistu Dessalegn).

## Conclusion and recommendations

Migration will continue to be practiced as a livelihood pathway in Ethiopia. Its support to the livelihoods of migrants and their families, and the contribution of remittances to the national economy are significant. However, global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and host governments' abrupt responses such as deportations can disrupt migration practices and systems, thereby adversely affecting remittance and other flows. It is important, therefore, to recognize not only the role of migration in sustainably supporting the livelihoods of households in the home areas, but also the consequences of disruption. Some key policy recommendations follow from this analysis:

- A separate institutional structure that can administer migration and reintegration issues and processes as its main agenda and mode of engagement could contribute to future crisis management and long-term migration needs. This should include a national framework to guide reintegration efforts and should be incorporated into the national migration policy framework.
- The existing bilateral relations between countries pertaining to labor migration should be further strengthened to promote collaboration that can ensure the safe and dignified return of migrants. Besides facilitating the sending of labor migrants, coordination with the receiving countries is necessary for facilitating return and reintegration processes.
- During crises, emergency support in the form of cash transfers or government safety-net programs should be provided to migrants returning home empty-handed after forced repatriation. Long-term economic reintegration programs should include appropriate skills training and job opportunities, linked with the existing rural job creation strategies and microfinance-based investment activities.
- Reintegration efforts should involve effective coordination among different agencies engaged in migration issues and processes. This should include private employment agencies that recruit labor migrants and facilitate migration processes. These agencies should also participate in reintegration of returnees. Reintegration should also be more inclusive with support provided to migrants with different status.
- In order to facilitate labor migration during the COVID-19 pandemic, government responses to the pandemic should consider the situation of migrants, including mobility. Bilateral negotiations should be conducted with countries receiving labor migrants to facilitate mobility during the pandemic without jeopardizing measures taken to mitigate the crisis. International cooperation and negotiations with neighboring countries can help minimize the impacts of uncoordinated border closures and travel restrictions.
- As the challenges posed by COVID-19 are not likely to disappear anytime soon, agencies engaged in migration processes should incorporate health and protection protocols in their migration approaches.

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Pedestrians and a street seller, Bole, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 2018 (photo: Alan Nicol).

#### **AGRUMIG Policy Brief Series**

This policy brief is one in a series of briefs produced as part of the AGRUMIG project.

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#### **AGRUMIG Project**

The project titled **AGRUMIG 'Leaving something behind' - Migration governance and agricultural & rural change in 'home' communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa** proposes an integrated approach to migration governance to address the two-way relationship between labor mobility and changes in agriculture and the rural sector. Migration creates challenges for rural 'sending' communities in low- and middle-income countries, yet it can also be transformative. The project engages in a comparative analysis of seven countries (China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand) to identify the economic, institutional, cultural and agroecological factors which shape these relationships. It will identify the range of governance interventions that can harness migration to stimulate sustainable, gender equitable growth in agriculture, and reduce the distress associated with migration.

**Donor:** European Union (EU) Horizon 2020 Framework Programme (H2020) under grant agreement number 822730

(Call: Towards forward-looking migration governance: Addressing the challenges, assessing capacities and designing future strategies)

**Project website:** <http://agrumig.iwmi.org>

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This project is part of the MARIS (Migration, Agriculture and Resilience: Initiative for Sustainability) network (<http://maris.iwmi.org>)

