

Internal migration and agricultural labor mobility issues and policies in Ethiopia

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Context

With a population of over 110 million in 2021, of which 85% live in rural areas, Ethiopia's economy is dominated by agriculture, contributing 45% to 50% of gross domestic product (GDP) and employing 70% of the active workforce.

Most farming remains characterized by smallholder plots, with rainfed systems predominating, yet increasingly vulnerable because of uncertain rainfall and temperature patterns. In addition, due to a complex of factors,

farmland frequently suffers from the depletion of soil nutrients.

As a result of too few new jobs and the rapidly expanding economically active population, about two million more people are added annually to the labor market. As a result, there is considerable international migration to the Gulf States, South Africa, Europe and North America. Internal rural-to-urban migration is also common, mainly to major cities and towns, especially to Addis Ababa and other major centers in south and southwest Ethiopia.



A brick production business owned by a female returnee migrant, Eastern Tigray, Ethiopia (photo: Ataklti Gebreegziabher).



Drivers of migration in Ethiopia are multifaceted and include climate risk, declining land fertility and quality, less remunerative agricultural production systems, and growing pressures for cash income to cover increasing rural expenses. An advantage of rural outmigration often cited is that remittances sent by migrants can cover the cost of agricultural inputs to increase productivity and pay for other household expenses. One notable challenge, however, in the AGRUMIG project study area in Table 1, is that outmigration is predominantly a male activity, leaving behind women to

carry out agricultural activities on top of traditional roles, including domestic work and caring for the elderly and children. This has usually led women to seek off-farm work to generate extra income with which to hire labor that can help with labor-intensive farming activities. Outmigration causes labor shortages, making it expensive to afford paid workers to help on farms. In some settings, labor shortages and high wages have led to land abandonment and changing cropping patterns, including switching from barley to potato production because it is less labor-intensive.

Table 1. Study site and migration context.

Site	Features of an agricultural economy	Percentage of HHs with seasonal migrants and destination (%)	Destination for seasonal migrants	Percentage of HHs with long-term migrants (%)	Destination for long-term migrants	Percentage of male and female migrants (%)
Gamo Highlands	Hilly terrain rainfed farming. Rural people depend on small-scale, rainfed subsistence farming. They also undertake rural-to-urban migration as a livelihood strategy.	NA	NA	73%	The predominant destination for migrants is the country's capital city (82%), with low numbers of female migration to the Middle East.	82% male 18% female

Note: HH = Household.



An urban farm in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (photo: Apollo Habtamu/IWMI).



Preparing land for cultivation in Ethiopia (photo: Maheder Haileselassie/IWMI).

Findings

In the Gamo Highlands of Ethiopia, households with migrants, particularly those with higher remittance inflows, have invested in livestock including cows, oxen, sheep, goats and horses. Farmers reduced the production of barley, a major food crop, as it required so much labor. Instead, households moved to less labor-intensive crops, including potatoes, which affected food consumption patterns. At the same time, unseasonal rains were a frequently reported challenge, with unexpected rainfall at harvest time damaging crops.

One of the principal factors in migration decision-making included the dependence of children on their parents to gain access to land. Many youths have no access to land holdings and therefore leave so they can provide cash income to support their families while achieving greater financial independence.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, AGRUMIG project research findings suggested that mobility restrictions related to the outbreak prevented many Ethiopian migrants from taking jobs abroad despite completing pre-departure training. The absence of coordination between private recruitment agencies and relevant government agencies involved in the pre-departure training further derailed enabling these migrants to secure employment abroad despite the easing of mobility restrictions. Ethiopian migrants who did not avail themselves of this training nevertheless continued to travel abroad for employment using unregulated or illegal migration routes. This situation could further encourage irregular migration and the vulnerability of migrants to exploitation by smugglers.

AGRUMIG project findings also reveal that the success of the Ethiopian rural job creation strategy in the Gamo Highlands could be further sustained by integrating rural employment and land access issues into policies on migration since little access to land and shortage of funds impede the program's implementation. It was also identified that pre-departure training has significant policy implications for migration governance as this promotes more regular and safer migration decision-making. This is done through the following:

- improving relations between labor migrants and their overseas employers, including understanding employment conditions in destination countries;
- agreed job contracts and bilateral agreements;
- preventing forcible apportionment of agricultural land as collateral to borrow money from private lenders to pay dealers facilitating irregular migration;
- remittances appropriately channeled for family expenses and agricultural needs instead of repaying debts to release the family's farmland;
- savings and investment of migrants' money in ventures on return; and
- less expensive and risk-averse migration routes in comparison with irregular migration.

An example of the investments made in the Gamo Highlands includes higher remittance inflows used to buy livestock, including cows, oxen, sheep, goats and horses.

Policy issues

Over the past decades, high population growth, low agricultural productivity and scarce resources, particularly land, have contributed to high unemployment rates, especially among young people, ultimately causing massive internal and international migration and labor mobility (Dessalegn et al. 2020). Although key destinations for international migration include the Gulf States, South Africa, North America and Europe, overall internal migration flows from rural to urban areas are higher than international migration, with Addis Ababa being the leading destination.

Remittances sent by migrants are used to pay for agricultural inputs to increase productivity and cover household expenses. However, rural outmigration is predominantly male, leaving women to undertake agrarian activities combined with traditional roles, such as domestic work and caring for the elderly and children. This can lead rural women left behind to seek off-farm work to generate extra income to hire paid agricultural labor. Sometimes, labor shortages and high wages have led to land abandonment or changing cropping patterns, including switching from barley to potato production as a less labor-intensive crop.

The overseas employment program is linked with the Overseas Employment Proclamation (2016). The aim is

to strengthen lawful overseas employment with a focus on bilateral state agreements, upholding the rights, safety and dignity of migrants involved in overseas employment, as well as giving pre-departure training for domestic migrant workers seeking jobs in the Gulf States and Lebanon. Training highlights working conditions for domestic workers in Gulf countries, protecting their human rights, covering travel procedures, employment rights and duties as well as occupational safety and financial management.

Covid-19 restrictions disrupted the pre-departure training for migrant workers and reduced coordination between relevant government institutions and private employment agencies. In the longer-term, challenges of coordination and accountability remain.

The rural job creation program launched by the Ministry of Agriculture and adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2017 aims to diversify job opportunity options for rural job seekers, create new rural job opportunities and address the effects of lack of employment, including migration to urban areas and poverty levels. Job seekers are organized under associations and form enterprises. The main engagement area is in agriculture, including livestock and crop production. Associations receive loans through microfinance and receive access to land.

References

Dessalegn, M.; Nicol, A.; Debevec, L. 2020. *From poverty to complexity?: the challenge of out-migration and development policy in Ethiopia*. Policy Brief of the Migration Governance and Agricultural and Rural Change (AGRUMIG) Project. London, UK: SOAS University of London. 8p. (AGRUMIG Policy Brief Series 2). <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/107904>

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>)

