

Ethiopia – South Africa Migration Corridor

Co-Investigators

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Research Context

With over 67,000 refugees, 230,000 recognised asylum-seekers and many more irregular migrants who have crossed into the country, South Africa is the country with the largest single concentration of (non-camp) refugees and asylum-seekers in Southern Africa. And Ethiopians are amongst the most significant of these migrant populations.

More than 3 million Ethiopians are believed to live abroad. The major destinations of Ethiopian migrants are: North America; Europe and the Gulf. South-South migration has primarily been directed to Kenya but recently South Africa has taken over as the major destination for Ethiopian migrants in the ‘south’. No one knows how many Ethiopians journey to South Africa through irregular means each year. But over the last two decades, tens of thousands of Ethiopians have migrated to South Africa. Ethiopian migration to South Africa is gendered. Most of the migrants are young male. The preferred destination for Ethiopian young female migrants is the gulf.

Migrants have left Ethiopia for political and economic reasons. Political drivers include conflicts associated with authoritarian practices and migration policy shifts international travel a lot easier. However, the major drivers are economic needs and aspirations (despite or because of rapid economic growth). Ethiopia has made significant strides in reducing rural poverty, improving life expectancy, and raising education levels. But these gains have come with rising urban income inequality; surging inflation and youth unemployment¹. And economic deprivation is intensified by regional inequality. Most of Ethiopian migrants in South Africa come from Southern Ethiopia, which is relatively lagging other parts of the country in development indicators. Decision-making is also informed by a chain migration – there is already an extensive social network in South Africa for migrants from Southern Ethiopia. This is also relevant during the process of adaptation – the migrants have recreated local institutions and social support systems in South Africa.

The phenomenal impact of remittances on the place of origins is also intimately connected to the migration dynamics. Annually, Ethiopia earns more than 4 billion

¹ THE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN ETHIOPIA STANDS AT 24%, MORE THAN DOUBLE OF THE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA.

USD in remittance, much more than export earnings. Southern Ethiopia, particularly the Hadiya-Kembata Zones have received one of the highest remittances, evident in the proliferation of state and private banks in their rural areas. The bustling town of Hosanna largely owes its vibrancy to the dynamic flow of resources and ideas in the Ethiopia-South Africa migration corridor.

Migrant Ethiopians have travelled through different routes, exploiting a variety of personal and commercial networks. They have received assistance from agents, relatives and networks in both Ethiopia and South Africa and indeed the countries they have passed through. The migration route along the corridor is particularly complicated for those crossing much of the continent by land. Migrants deal with a significant number of intermediaries along the way. They often face uncertain transport arrangements and shifts in the routes. There are incidents of extremely dangerous transport arrangements, as the death of dozens of Ethiopian migrants in shipping container in Mozambique in March 2020 indicates. And even where intermediary arrangements are more formalised the journey is complicated by regulation and by the extra legal status of migrants in each country they cross. Many have spent significant periods in jail or in refugee camps.

Extreme institutional and language barriers inhibit the entry of Ethiopian migrants into the formal job market in South Africa. But considerable opportunity for retail lies in the underdevelopment of formal retail in much of sub-Saharan Africa. It is a space that has readily been occupied by small and informal business, much of it operating below the radar and without the support of formal financial, taxation and trading administration. An increasing number of foreign migrants in South Africa are involved in micro-retail activities including street vending, hawking and petty trading.

Many Ethiopians have established or worked in retail businesses in a high-rise district of the inner city of Johannesburg. Here they have incrementally created a retail enclave. The little known 'Ethiopian Quarter' – otherwise known as 'Jeppe' – is an intense retail space selling cheap Chinese merchandise to customers from surrounding townships, from rural South Africa and from sub-Saharan Africa.

Those who have entered retail business (a large majority) have done so through similarly dense, often informal, networks with more or less deep connections to familial, neighbourhood, religious and other structures. And a number of religious and customary networks and structures have been fashioned in the host country to serve the needs of newly arrived migrants. These have been adapted to local circumstances and their roles altered through the local situation that migrants face in South Africa.

Agglomeration of co-ethnic entrepreneurs offers a defensive space for migrants arriving from Ethiopia in a strange city where language barriers and intolerance combined with unfamiliar laws and modes of business practice make navigation difficult. This is also a site of employment for new arrivals who work as shop assistants.

Work packages

WP2: Inequality as it relates to children

WP3: Income inequality

WP6: Flow of finance, goods and ideas

Research Questions

1. How do inequalities develop through childhood in relation to migration such as stages of childhood, migration and types of inequalities; children's awareness/families' awareness (information, counseling, legal assistance); support systems/types of intermediaries, and risk factors and predatory actors/types of intermediaries. (WP2)
2. How does migration impact (support or undermine) the human potential of children such as access to services especially education, health, food; access to and use of ICT; child labour's impact on children's wellbeing, and the role of remittances? (WP2)
3. How does age influence migration decision-making and outcomes such as the role of children and their wellbeing in migration decisions (directly, indirectly); the role of children within households and communities (economic, social, cultural), and children as actors of their own migration (autonomy and assistance, boredom and aspirations, social spaces and societal participation). (WP2)
4. To what extent does access to migration in the Eth-SA corridor change inequality in the areas of origin? This is examined through four basic interactions: how differential access to resources enables people's migration; transfers from migrants to the origin area; the return of migrants to the origin area; and indirect changes in migrant households' income generating potential. (WP3)
5. What are the implications of settlement of Eth migrants on inequality in SA? (WP3)
6. To what extent is movement in the corridor shaped by and shaping inequality between Ethiopia and South Africa? (WP3)
7. What are the characteristics of the resource flows between South Africa and Ethiopia – composition, size, transmission mechanisms and interactions amongst flows? (WP6)
8. What are the characteristics of businesses owned/managed/financed by Eth migrants in SA? (WP6)

9. What are the characteristics of businesses linked by ownership, management or investment financing to diasporas or returnee migrants in SA? (WP6)
10. What has been the impact of Eth migrants' professional and technical (nonbusiness) skills brought from Eth to SA or taken back from SA to Eth? What has been the impact in Eth of social remittances sent from SA? (WP6)

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