



# POLICY BRIEF

## Rural-Urban Migration and Poverty in Ethiopia

### Summary

*This policy brief focuses on rural-urban migration in Ethiopia. Research shows that poverty and lack of opportunity are drivers of young people's rural-urban migration. However, migration to the cities has not led to a flow of remittances from urban to rural areas. Non-economic factors are central to many young people's migration and to why they regarded migration as positive despite the lack of short-term economic benefit. The policy brief argues that the government of Ethiopia and development partners must recognise and support the development potential of migration and integrate it into development planning. There are ways in which migration can be made to work for the poor and support development.*

### Background to the Study

Research investigated the links between migration and poverty in Ethiopia in 2013. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in three locations, which incorporated both migrant sending areas (South Gondor) and destinations for migrants (Bahir Dar and Addis Ababa). The study focused on domestic and construction workers due to the high demand for labour in these two sectors in cities, which is often supplied by migrants.

### POVERTY AND MIGRATION IN ETHIOPIA

In 2012 about 30% of Ethiopians lived under the national poverty line. This proportion, as well as the proportion of the population living under the \$1.25 poverty line, has been steadily declining in the last 20 years. However, low incomes are just the beginning of the problems faced by many in Ethiopia. Lack of access to basic services, lack of jobs and economic activities and malnutrition affect many poor rural areas. Very small plot sizes mean that many farmers cannot produce enough to support their families.

Rural-urban migration is associated with a range of issues linked to rural poverty and lack of opportunity. However, Ethiopia has relatively low levels of migration, a high economic growth rate, small urban population and fast growing population. All the conditions indicate that rural-urban migration is inevitable and increasing.

Historically the Ethiopian government has sought to prevent or control migration. In the 1980s, the *villagisation* Land Reform Policy (1984), aimed to increase agricultural production and improve delivery of services such as education and health. The policy involved the forced relocation of many Ethiopians into grid-plan villages. Agricultural production suffered due to the long distances between farmers' new homes and their farms. As food production plummeted, poverty levels increased and famine struck Ethiopia, internal migration increased rather than decreased.

The Sustainable Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (SPRSP) of 2002 continued to view migration as a problem. Only planned and government organised migration was seen as productive while other forms of migration led to natural resource degradation and ethnic tension. The 2006 'Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty' (PASDEP) claimed that migration compounded urban development problems, spread diseases such as HIV, led to urban poverty and unemployment. The 2010 Growth and Transformation Plan does not mention migration at all. Migration is consistently framed as a challenge and problem which development must solve.

One way the government controls rural-urban migration is by maintaining the Derg Regime's land tenure policies, prohibiting landholders from selling, exchanging or mortgaging their land under Article 40 of its constitution. This makes it difficult for poor rural households to sell their land and migrate to urban areas.



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Ethiopian strategy documents of development partners such as USAID (2012), DFID (2012) and the World Bank (2012) are either silent on migration or mention it only as a problem, linked to refugee flows and instability in the region.

## DRIVERS OF MIGRATION

### Economic drivers of migration

Opportunities to find paid work or engage in entrepreneurial activity in rural areas are extremely limited. Wages in rural areas are also considerably lower than those in urban areas. Continuing in education is often difficult or impossible for young people in rural areas, either because opportunities to progress from primary school do not exist or they are unaffordable. Access to healthcare, electricity and other public services is also very limited in rural areas.

Economic drivers of migration in rural areas include:

- Lack of employment and business opportunities
- Low wages
- Lack of access to education
- Lack of access to other public services,
- Small agricultural plots and low productivity

The study identified bleak agricultural prospects in rural areas as a factor that drove migrants to the urban areas where it was believed that there were more opportunities. Those interviewed cited the exorbitant costs of agricultural resources and lack of rural development as some of the factors inhibiting farming success, negatively impacting on agricultural productivity and increasing poverty.

The government's land tenure policy, which decrees that every family member can inherit the family land, and prevents sale of land, acts as an economic driver especially for households that have many family members but little land that can sufficiently satisfy their livelihood needs. The small land sizes allocated to large families become unsustainable. Migration, therefore, becomes a strategy for young people to gain access to income generating activities in urban areas.

"There is no opportunity here! The government has done some work in some areas, but this area is abandoned. The males choose to migrate rather than letting their family land divide between them, the same case also works for the females who don't have any choice except becoming the wife of a poor farmer. So this led them to bounce to the city rather than waiting here to suffer. Even if there is work they don't give chance for our children. The chance goes to those who are connected to the government and have a relative who have some power in the government hierarchy." - Mother of a migrant domestic worker

### Social and cultural drivers of migration

The social and cultural drivers of migration include:

- Inheritance practices
- Forced and early marriage
- Family disputes
- Desire for independence and agency

Practices of inheritance of livestock or land where households divide their land between marriageable sons decrease the land-holding size of subsequent generations in addition to allowing women minimal access to land resources.

Some women and girls cited escaping unwanted early or arranged marriages as a

driver for their migration. The study also found out that minor family disputes or disagreements was another social driver of rural-urban migration in the areas of study.

The desire to live independently was a socio-economic driver of rural-urban migration for young people in large families. Small agricultural plot sizes gave young people the feeling that they were dependent and a burden on their households, which demoralised them. Young people viewed migration to urban areas as a route to an independent life.



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“Sometimes when they are not married and they live with their family, they willingly migrate to cities to start their own life. There are also those who are provoked to migrate by poverty. Women know in detail about the economic condition of their families, so when they observe that the family is short of basic necessities and is poor, they decide to migrate and work in cities. In addition, there are those who migrate when their parents do not approve of their boyfriend and force them to stop their affair. They flee away to cities to escape from the control of their parents and to live as they want.” - Sister of a migrant domestic worker

## MIGRATION AND POVERTY IN THE CITY

Although many of the respondents had migrated to escape rural poverty, both domestic and construction workers reported that they were still poor and lived in poor conditions once they had migrated.

Construction workers highlighted the challenge of finding secure accommodation due to the high rent costs in safe neighbourhoods and the high safety risks of living in low cost neighbourhoods. Both construction and domestic workers cited their inability to afford food and clothing and difficulty securing a job. Migrant construction workers in particular found it difficult to find employment as jobs were scarce and dependent on the season and area. As such, the respondents indicated that their economic situation had not changed for the better after migration.

The respondents, however, stressed that they were more independent in the cities. Living independently included managing their own income, living apart from their family, having control over their marriage, shedding the tag of being a burden to the family, supporting their parents and having nice clothes, food and hairstyles. The control and agency that young people had gained over their lives was important to them. Migration had relieved their families by sparing them the extra expenses they would have incurred if the migrants had stayed in the rural areas.

“To live in larger cities is good! After she started living in Addis Ababa, she began to dress well and give time for her cleanliness. If we are not starving it is also a change. At least she can eat now! However, there are also some problems. For instance, when she gets the higher salary the workload is very high and she becomes exhausted.” - Mother of a migrant domestic worker

## IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON DOMESTIC AND CONSTRUCTION MIGRANT WORKERS

In Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar, migrants found jobs that they could not have done in the rural areas and were paid more than they would have been in rural areas. Skilled and experienced construction workers could earn 100 ETB (5 USD) a day while new employees earned around 25 ETB (1.5 USD). The wage levels in both industries are discretionary and based on skill and experience. According to a contractor/employer, construction workers who are hired on a monthly contract earn 25 ETB (1.5 USD) whereas those who work for less than a month but for a consecutive number of days earn 45 ETB (2.5 USD). In the domestic work sector, skilled cooks can earn more than 1000 ETB (50 USD) per month. Less experienced domestic workers earn as little as 350 ETB (18 USD) per month.

Domestic workers said that it was difficult for them to get employment without a guarantor, who can assume responsibility in the event that the domestic worker is involved in theft, misconduct and property damage at her place of work. Domestic workers work in a particularly vulnerable and unregulated sector; respondents reported sexual abuse, rape, verbal abuse, long working hours as well as low and unpaid wages.

In both industries, migrants said that their jobs involved health risks and/or that getting sick was a major concern. Insurance or health services for the workplace are either lacking or inaccessible. Access to healthcare or sick leave is at employer’s discretion because there is no policy that holds them accountable for occupational injuries. Female domestic workers complained that some employers were only concerned about illnesses where these posed a threat to them or their family members.



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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**The overarching recommendation is that the government of Ethiopia and development partners recognise that rural-urban migration is an inevitable and important part of development and embrace the potentially poverty reducing impacts of migration. Migration must be incorporated into development planning. Attempts to prevent migration are usually counter productive.**

This can be achieved by taking action in three key ways: removing barriers to migration, encouraging remittance sending and protecting the rights of migrants.

### **Removing barriers to migration**

The government of Ethiopia could unlock latent potential in its workforce by removing explicit and hidden barriers to migration. Examples of ways this could be achieved are:

- Reforming land tenure systems so that households can consolidate land holdings and send some members to cities temporarily or permanently to work.
- Removing administrative barriers to migrants from different states seeking employment in cities.

### **Encouraging remittance sending**

Many migrants in Ethiopia do not send remittances back to rural areas. Such remittances could support rural livelihoods, improve living standards and be used to invest in human capital, business or agricultural production. The government should work with the private sector to reduce the costs to migrants traveling to cities, living in cities and remitting money home. Investing in the M-Birr mobile money transfer service is a welcome step.

### **Protecting the rights of migrants**

Protecting the rights of all Ethiopians is important, and the government must enforce its own domestic laws and the international standards that it has ratified. Construction work and domestic work are informal and unregulated sectors in many contexts. Protecting the rights of workers, even in informal settings is important. The government could:

- Enforce safety standards at construction sites more effectively.
- Regulate agents who manage domestic workers.
- Eliminate the need for a guarantor to start work as a domestic worker.
- Protect the rights of women and girls through preventing forced marriage, early marriage, and gender-based violence in rural areas and urban areas.
- Enforce laws against sexual assault and rape of domestic workers more effectively.
- Include domestic workers in labour legislation and include them as a group needing special protection in the national women policy.

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