



# **Poverty, Youth and Rural-Urban Migration in Ethiopia**

Adamnesh Atnafu, Linda Oucho and  
Benjamin Zeitlyn

Working Paper 17

July 2014

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the migrants and their families who gave their time to speak to us in the process of this research. We also benefited from conversations with a range of experts who participated in this research as key informants. Adamnesh Atnafu led a team of research assistants in the fieldwork. The research assistants were: Emebet Mulugeta, Amid Ahmed, Elisabeth Belayneh, Aynadis Yohannes and Addisu Tegegne.

We are also grateful for the financial support from the UK Department of International Development (DFID), which supports policies, programmes and projects to promote poverty reduction globally. DFID provided funds for this study as part of that goal but the views and opinions expressed are those of the authors alone.

Migrating out of Poverty

Arts B, University of Sussex

Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QN, United Kingdom

tel: +44 (0)1273 873535

email: [migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk)

web: <http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/>

© 2014 by Adamnesh Atnafu, Linda Oucho and Benjamin Zeitlyn. Short sections of text, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted without explicit permission provided that full credit, including © notice, is given to the source.

## Abstract

This paper explores the relationships between poverty and rural-urban migration in Ethiopia. It draws upon research particularly of migration for work in the construction industry and domestic work. The paper describes and analyses migration from a poor rural woreda (district) in northern Ethiopia, to the nearby city of Bahir Dar and the capital, Addis Ababa. Extreme poverty is one of the main driving factors behind these flows of migration. Our research suggests that migration of this type does not lead to immediate flows of remittance income from migrants to their households. We explain why this is, and how migrants and their households nevertheless plan to move out of poverty. We argue that there are important non-economic factors and long-term strategies that encourage migration even where working conditions are hard and returns are low.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	5
2. Methods .....	7
3. Poverty and Migration .....	8
3.1 Rural poverty in Ethiopia .....	8
3.2 Migration as a strategy of youth.....	10
4. Migrants in the city .....	12
4.1 Facing hardships in the city.....	12
4.2 Life is better in the city .....	14
5. The impacts of migration .....	16
5.1 Sending remittances .....	16
5.2 Migration supported entrepreneurship .....	17
5.3 Education and migration.....	18
5.4 The step migration project .....	19
6. Conclusions .....	20
References .....	21

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores how the poverty and lack of opportunity in rural Ethiopia drives migration, how poor rural-urban migrants fare in the cities of Ethiopia, what the outcomes of migration are in the short term, and what migrants hope to achieve in the longer term. The assumption in the literature is that the purpose of rural-urban migration is to increase the level of income of households by sending some members from rural areas with relatively low wages to industrialised cities, where wages are higher. In Ethiopia, wages in urban areas are much higher than in rural areas; in 2000 they were twice as high both in formal and informal employment. Poverty levels, however, do not show the same extreme differences in rural and urban areas as they do in other African countries (de Brauw *et al.* 2013b). Once in the cities, the assumption is that migrants earn money, live frugally and send remittances 'home' to their families and households.

In the context of internal migration in Ethiopia, this appears not to be so straightforward. Internal migration flows in Ethiopia over the last few decades have been driven by economic, climatic and political factors, including drought, war, political turmoil, forced migrations and poverty (Berhanu and White 2000; Comenetz and Caviedes 2002). There is some evidence that small plots of farmland, which are inadequate to support a family, are a driver of migration (World Bank 2010). Gibson and Gumru (2012) report that a development initiative providing water taps in villages in Ethiopia led to lower mortality rates and higher fertility. The resulting competition between male siblings for land led to higher rates of migration in the villages that had taps than those that did not. For women and girls, there is evidence that early marriage and sexual abuse are drivers of migration (World Bank 2010). Nevertheless, migration rates in Ethiopia are relatively low. Migration is mainly to nearby towns, and for the purpose of employment (de Brauw *et al.* 2013a; World Bank 2010). Low rates of migration may be linked to land ownership policies in Ethiopia. All land is owned and allocated by the government and households maintain the right to farm it through continuous residence and use of the land, this mitigates against migration (de Brauw and Mueller 2012).

De Brauw *et al.* (2013a) and the World Bank (2010) found that sending remittances was relatively rare for unskilled rural-urban migrants in Ethiopia. De Brauw *et al.* (2013b) report data suggesting that 33 per cent of rural-urban migrants in Ethiopia sent remittances. The World Bank's (2010) survey of migrants to Addis Ababa, found that only 13 per cent sent remittances. De Brauw *et al.* (2013a; 2013b) attempt to find some explanations for this pattern.

One hypothesis, based on an association between the ownership of cattle and higher rates of sending remittances, is that migrants feel some ownership of livestock and that livestock farmers face liquidity constraints so that migration is part of an overall household livelihood strategy. The second plausible hypothesis they propose, which partly fits with the evidence from this study, is that living conditions of migrants are not that much better than their families, so that do not remit. Households benefit from migration because they share their resources among fewer members after one

member has migrated (de Brauw *et al.* 2013a; World Bank 2010). A third hypothesis is that a lack of easy and affordable means of sending remittances or prohibitive transaction costs stop migrants from remitting. Finally, rates of remitting might appear low because of the cross-sectional methods of most research, which do not take into account the long-term household strategies that migration often forms a part of. At a certain point in time, most migrants will be a net cost to their household, but the hope is that over a longer time period migration will lead to returns on the initial investment (de Brauw *et al.* 2013b). In this paper we identify three such strategies among the participants in the research that represent long-term plans for improvements in well-being. These are 'migration supported entrepreneurship', continuing education, and step migration.

Like de Brauw *et al.* (2013b) and Clemens and Ogden (2013), we see migration as an investment in human capital. As they point out, investment in migration is often the only or the most profitable available form of investment open to the rural poor. For the poorest people in Farta Woreda, the amount that they can invest is very small, and often will only take them to Bahir Dar, the nearest city, just over 100 kilometres away. From there, migrants earn, save and invest again, to take themselves to Addis Ababa (700km away), from where some plan to save up to pay the costs of international migration. The majority of migrants who participated in this research reported that they did not send remittances back to their households. The reasons for this were described as being because wages are low and costs are high for urban migrants working as domestic and construction workers in Ethiopia. Conditions of work and life in the cities are harsh. However, migration is seen by many as their only option in the face of poverty, and although the immediate returns are negligible, many consider their standard of life improved through living in the city and some reported using migration as part of a longer term strategy for improvements in well-being.

Migration is a strategy for moving out of poverty that is accessible to the poor in rural Ethiopia. It is often a risky investment, it has low short term returns, has the potential to end in disaster, exposes migrants to exploitation, hard work and abuse. However, in many cases it is the only investment opportunity available, and the only opportunity some of the rural poor have to change their lives. Many of the participants in this research linked migration to education, and the comparison illustrates the nature of migration as an investment in human capital. The poverty and lack of opportunity in Farta Woreda mean that accessing and completing education is extremely difficult and has high opportunity costs for rural households. It is a major investment for a poor household to send all their children to school, which requires considerable sacrifice. It is also an investment that often does not pay off. Educational failure, either through early drop out or failure in exams, or for those who managed to complete education but then found that they still could not find a job, played a role in many of the migrants who participated in this research.

## 2. Methods

This research is based on a qualitative study in Farta Woreda in the South Gondar zone and Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) of Ethiopia. The woreda was selected based on key informant interviews that indicated that it has a large number of migrant households. Within the woreda, the study was carried out in seven *Kebeles* (the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia, translated as 'neighbourhood').

The research focuses upon migrant domestic and construction workers who are resident in Bahir Dar and Addis Ababa. The criteria for the migrant households were: a household with at least one migrant member who has migrated to Addis Ababa of Bahir Dar for not less than one year – long enough to experience the context of life in relation to the migration for both the family and the migrant.

Data was generated through semi-structured interviews with migrants working in construction work and domestic work in the cities (9), members of migrant (39) and non-migrant (5) households (from 36 different households all together), key informant interviews (12) and focus group discussions (2). Key informants were selected on the basis that their professional roles covered migration, poverty reduction or both. Quotes in this paper come from these interviews, but are reported anonymously. During the process of selection of interview participants, it was of utmost importance that gender was taken into consideration. Consequently, the research team attempted to achieve equal balance of women and men interviewees for this study.

Interviews were conducted in Amharic at the interviewee's home or workplace, were recorded, and lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. The interview questions were designed to retrieve information about the informants' lived experiences of life before and after migration, mainly focusing on determinants of migration, impact of the migration on the household, impact of the migration on migrants, risks and vulnerabilities associated with migration, and the impacts and relationships of migration and poverty.

The data was transcribed after the interviews. The transcripts were read as an initial stage of data analysis to obtain an overall sense of the data. This helped in framing the themes that were identified and the relationships/order of the themes that were determined. Accordingly, the data were inspected to get an in-depth understanding of the experience of the respondents to better understand the meaning of each case. The data were processed and analysed using NVIVO qualitative data analysis software following a phenomenological approach.

### 3. Poverty and Migration

#### **3.1 Rural poverty in Ethiopia**

Poverty in Ethiopia is declining, but levels of absolute poverty are still high. The proportion of Ethiopians who fell below the national poverty line in 2004 and 2005 stood at 36 per cent and reduced to 29.6 per cent in 2011. The national poverty line for 2010/11 was determined to be ETB 3,781 per person per year. The majority of those living under the poverty line were in rural areas, where the proportion below the poverty line stood at 30.4 per cent, in comparison to 25.7 per cent in urban areas. The decline is attributed to pro-poor policies since 2005 and the Ethiopian government's efforts for creating opportunities that were mostly concentrated at the urban areas (MOFED 2012:7). The majority of the population in Farta Woreda are living below the national poverty line (FEG 2007).

In the rural areas, programmes such as the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) established in 2005 focus on assisting the rural poor who are experiencing food insecurity as a result of environmental disasters. At the same time, the programme helps rural residents to engage in income generating opportunities and investments that can help the household support itself (World Food Programme 2012). In regions such as Farta Woreda, the PSNP is a major source of household income for poor families (FEG 2007). Although these programmes and policies have been developed to tackle poverty in the rural areas, and the situation is improving slowly, poverty is still a ubiquitous reality in much of Ethiopia.

Gebeyehu (2014: 9) characterises poverty in Ethiopia as a state of

... landlessness, lack of productive assets, absence of income, food shortage, marginalization, lack of access to education, health, and other basic services, and an inability to obtain employment.

Gebeyehu's analysis is consistent with the responses of the participants in this study, who explained that that poverty was a result of the lack of development in rural areas such as Farta Woreda, which are predominantly engaged in agricultural activities. The lack of development in many rural areas means that there is very limited access to basic needs such as clean water, electricity, health services and education. The main local form of employment is farming. There are few employment options available in many rural areas such as Farta Woreda. A 17-year-old domestic worker in Addis Ababa explains her condition prior to migration by stating:

Poverty is the only reason I have. If my family were not poor I can learn my education at my family's home. At that time my mother were not having any income, though she open a small shop after I left home. My father income is not sufficient to meet the family basic need. Despite the fact that I was not that much matured I was having the moral obligation to go out and work so that my family at least have something to eat'. (17-year-old female Domestic Worker, Addis Ababa)



In addition, respondents indicated that a scarcity of land in rural Ethiopia was one of the most pressing problems for them. They linked the problem to the government's legal frameworks that outline how land is managed by the regional government. In 1997, the Ethiopia government developed the *Rural Land Administration Proclamation*, authorising regional governments to manage the administrative process of land in their selected regions. Gebeyehu (2013:3) argues:

... the legal frameworks provide a mixed signal about land transactions. On the one hand the proclamations and regulations tend to encourage farmers to rent out their holdings or use rights. On the other hand, they don't give adequate freedom to practice legal land transactions.

One of the most commonly reported challenges facing large rural households was that the plots of land available to each family member to use to support their own family were too small to support them. Restrictions on the abilities of rural people to buy or sell land mean that it is difficult for many to use their capital, tied up in land for another purpose. A 30-year-old migrant working in construction recalls the challenge of acquiring land for him and his family:

First, scarcity of arable land is the major one. When I got married, the parents of my wife promised me a plot of land. But, eventually they refused to give it to me. I was annoyed with what they did. On my side, it was with my brother that I grew up with. It was difficult for me to ask my brother for arable land since he possessed too little land himself. This instigated me to migrate. (30-year-old Construction Worker, Addis Ababa).

A key informant from Farta Woreda also linked the reasons for migration with land scarcity:

No, there are not many alternative sources of livelihood. It is not a well-developed area. So it does not have any industries or factories. So there is no condition that can keep all members of the community in their locality. So there is a habit of moving out to cities. Most of the migrants are women since they mostly are economically dependent. (Key Informant, Farta Woreda)

Livelihood options in Farta Woreda are limited. Sources of cash income for the poorest households included: self-employment such as collecting and selling firewood, cash transfer programmes such as the PSNP, and agricultural labour. Wealthier households mainly earned cash from crop and livestock sales (FEG 2007). According to a local key informant, agricultural labourers in Farta Woreda earn 30-40 ETB (1.5-2 USD) per day. This is a similar rate to that earned by construction workers in the city. However, jobs are limited in rural areas and the work is seasonal, labourers are only needed during the harvest time.

### **3.2 Migration as a strategy of youth**

Young people in Farta Woreda have the impression that there is no opportunity for them in the woreda. This is especially true of those who have completed formal education and are seeking employment opportunities in rural areas. The education received by the youth is geared toward white-collar jobs available in the cities, which does not prove advantageous in securing the predominantly agricultural jobs in their area. A male respondent explained the situation of the youth, especially focusing on the reason for young male out-migration:

Mostly, youths are experiencing migration to urban areas. More specifically, males migrate starting the age of 18 and females at the age of 15. Most of the male migrants are low achievers in their education. Their result could not able them to join to college, university or vocational training and education. (Male Migrant Household Resident, Farta Woreda).

In terms of young female students, some households stated that their poor conditions placed them in a position where they could not afford the required school materials. This woman explained the reasons for her sister's migration as such:

Since our family is/was living in poverty, they were keen to improve their life and live independently. The situation got worse after the death of our father. The family could not cover the educational and other expenses for them. Here, there is nothing to work and change oneself. As a result, my sisters were obliged to migrate. (19-year-old female household member, Farta Woreda)

Others indicated that they did not emphasise the importance of education enough, so that their daughters failed and dropped out of school. This was the case as described by the 47-year-old father of a female migrant in Addis Ababa:

We are living in poverty and her basic necessities were not fulfilled. We didn't give emphasis whether she pursue her education or not. I remember, I was insisting her not to go to school to help me on the farm. As a result, She failed at grade six twice. In addition, she is the eldest among my children; she used to face labour exploitation. Triggered by her failure in education and the living condition of us, she migrated to Addis Ababa. (47-year-old Father of Domestic Worker, Farta Woreda)

Poor households experience economic difficulties due to the size of their families, whom they are unable to support. Young girls and boys from the poorest families drop out of school to seek employment opportunities in the city, either by the own volition or through the encouragement of their parents. A key informant from Farta Woreda stated that:

When families find it hard to support their members, parents suggest that the children/youth go to the cities to earn a living for themselves and send money

for the family. Some parents are convinced when they see other children/youth from the community who have migrated to the cities and support their families. Therefore, they suggest their daughters or sons do the same and share their burden. As a result, the children and youth feel the obligation to take on the responsibility and move to fulfil their parents' wishes. (Key Informant, Farta Woreda)

Older rural residents are also negatively impacted due to the lack of support or access to resources that would help to meet their basic needs. For instance, a 46-year-old divorced mother explains the reason for her daughter's migration was due to her age and inability to care for the large family on her own. She states:

She said I am becoming old and weak and after raising her and her siblings with a lot of difficulties, she shouldn't bother me anymore. She wanted to live by herself. There are some things she could do here but it is better in the city. So she went away to Addis Ababa. So she migrated due to family poverty. (46-year-old Divorced Mother, Farta Woreda)

Poverty was particularly acute in single-parent and especially female-headed households, where one income had to support a large household. The single-parent households in this study were the results of divorce or death of one of the spouses. In terms of the former, some women described that the divorce was not amicable and, as such, they were placed in a difficult position financially to support a large household. The experience described by a 60-year-old divorced mother in Farta Woreda depicts how her poor financial state and divorce impacted on her three daughters who migrated to Addis Ababa. She indicated that:

The major problem is I am poor and my financial capacity retards me from keeping them with me. I was also in conflict with their father and they were not happy with it. (60-year-old mother with three migrant daughters in Addis Ababa)

The rural poor use migration as a strategy to overcome their desperate poverty. Research participants explained that there are no opportunities available to them in the rural areas. They hoped to take advantage of the opportunities and services available in the cities. Interestingly, several key informants, mainly living and working in Addis Ababa, were of the opinion that migration makes urban poverty worse by overwhelming urban services:

Rural urban migration aggravates urban poverty. Obviously, the migrants need various service, as water, electricity, housing, etc. So, these needs of migrants will create limitations on the service system thereby aggravates the urban poverty'. (Key Informant, Addis Ababa)

Poverty and lack of opportunity in rural areas, therefore, are the key drivers of rural residents seeking better opportunities in the cities. This type of migration creates concerns among urban residents about the demands on services available in the

cities. Migrants working in construction and domestic work find conditions hard in the cities, as we will see in the next section. Despite these challenges and opposition, until conditions change in the poor rural areas where migrants come from, rural-urban migration will remain a key strategy for poor people to escape their situations.

#### 4. Migrants in the city

Before migration, male migrants were mainly engaged in farming, carpentry, daily labour, shepherding, peddling, and helping their family in business, while female migrants were mainly students or helping in household chores. We focused on migrants who worked in construction and domestic work in the cities, as these are two of the most common industries where migrant labour is in high demand. On arrival in the cities, migrants need support for their integration. Relatives and friends mainly provide support when they first arrive, until they get jobs and somewhere to live.

Income levels vary in both construction and domestic work industries. For domestic workers, the range is wider, employment more stable, and the salaries are paid monthly. Domestic workers in Bahir Dar earn between 150 - 350 ETB (8 - 18 USD) a month, while those in Addis Ababa earn between 350 - 1000 ETB (18 - 50 USD). According to a key informant who is a broker in the domestic work industry, domestic workers who have skills of cooking both Ethiopian and international foods can earn more than 1000 ETB (50 USD) a month, while those who do not have cooking skills are hired for as low as 350 ETB (18 USD) a month.

Most construction workers earn between 25 - 45 ETB (1.5 - 2.5 USD) a day, while those who have many years of experience and skills can earn 100 ETB (5 USD) a day. However, these rates are daily wages that migrant construction workers earn for sporadic work in informal arrangements with employers. They cannot simply be extrapolated to calculate monthly incomes. The difference in earning in both sectors depends on employment terms and specific conditions. For instance, as noted by a key informant who is a contractor/employer of construction workers, those construction workers who earn 25 ETB (1.5 USD) per day are hired for a whole month. The payment rises to 45 ETB (2.5 USD) if the terms are to work for a number of days that is less than a month. Similarly, specific conditions such as skill level and years of experience in the city are factors that influence the wages in both industries.

##### **4.1 Facing hardships in the city**

As most migrants do not have jobs awaiting them, one of the economic challenges the migrants mentioned is searching for a job and getting employed. This was a problem that particularly affected construction workers. Construction jobs are unstable, hiring and contracting practices are informal, and the chance of getting a job depends on the area and season. Domestic workers did not mention finding a job as a challenge, because they often deal with employment agents or found jobs through relatives. However, domestic workers sometimes had difficulties finding

guarantors in order to be employed. Domestic employers require the worker to find someone who serves as a guarantor for the worker in case of misconduct, property damage or theft. This creates a difficulty for the migrant if she cannot get somebody to take the risk of being her guarantor.

Migrants mentioned that the costs of living in the cities made it difficult for them to save and remit money to their families. Buying food, paying for transport and housing consumed all or most of their wages.

... the income I get here does not cover more than the cost for house rent and food. Even there are times that you may not have work for a week and cannot afford to buy food... (21-year-old male migrant construction worker)

The interviews with migrants engaged in construction work also revealed another challenge they face in attempting to find employment, which is related to the issue of identification. Most people in the rural areas do not hold identification cards, which creates a problem for them when they come to the city, where they are required to produce one when applying for employment. A survey carried out by the World Bank found that 90 per cent of domestic workers in Addis Ababa were unregistered (World Bank 2010). According to an official in Addis Ababa, the districts in the cities do not provide them with new identification cards unless they bring evidence of residence from their birthplace. To get this documentation they have to go back to their hometown and come back to the city. For many newly arrived migrants, they simply cannot afford to travel back to their family's home. They may have invested their savings or family savings in making the journey in the first place.

Migrants in both sectors of employment faced extremely hard working conditions, poor living conditions, long hours, low pay and regular dangers in their workplaces. For the construction workers the main dangers were unsafe working conditions that led to accidents. Employers were extremely reluctant to help construction workers after they had accidents and there was little or no compensation for them.

For the domestic workers the main danger was usually their employer or exploitative men in powerful positions. Bullying, insults, violence, sexual abuse, rape, sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies were all too common among the domestic workers we spoke to and the same pattern is reported in other research (World Bank 2010).

... the house I was employed in as a housemaid for the first time was totally a mess and I suffered a lot. The head of the household, the father, came home drunk in the middle of the night and it was my duty to open the gate for him. In addition, he sexually harassed me and forced me to have sex with him. It was a torture... (18-year-old migrant domestic worker)

Labour exploitation was another type of violations of the rights of domestic workers. In some cases wages went unpaid for months or were absurdly low for the amount of work and hours involved. Domestic workers face a job with no set hours, and no

set duties, meaning that their job description and hours are open to the discretion, and abuse, of their employer.

Poor health caused by dangerous working conditions, long hours of hard work and the abuse they suffered was not of much concern to the employers of migrant domestic workers and construction workers. Unless it posed a risk to the employer, health problems seemed to be ignored or perceived as an opportunity to skip work.

When you get ill, they misperceive it. Employers take your illness as a pretention and a reason not to do the work for them. Yet, it is you who know and feel the pain. In this regard, my employers were too cruel and did not understand my pain and illness... (19-year-old female migrant domestic worker)

Nonetheless, despite the above challenges of finding employment, low earnings, infringement of basic human rights, and susceptibility for health risks, migrants recognise that they are better off at the cities and have progressed their status.

Migrants had different ways of coping with their physical and mental suffering in the cities. Church was one of the most frequently used institutions as a support system. Migrants found peace, rest, spiritual help and communities through churches in the cities:

... I always go to church when I feel bad. For instance, once I was seriously sick but my employer refused to let me rest. I started to work on what she ordered but I could not do anything because of the pain. So I went to the church and prayed. After that I slept the whole day in the compound. Church is my only way out for the problems that I face... (19-year-old female migrant domestic worker)

The other support systems that migrants create in the cities are social networks and events with relatives, other family members, and friends who live in the city. They usually share days off and holidays, or ask for their support in the event of a disagreement with their employers. A disagreement with employers normally results in joblessness for the migrants.

#### ***4.2 Life is better in the city***

Despite the hardships that migrants face in their jobs and lives in the cities, interviews with migrant domestic and construction workers revealed that they considered themselves better off in the cities. They felt that their well-being was improved by urban life. Many migrants and their families mentioned that in the cities they had food to eat, they were well dressed, they could be clean and they were more stylish and better looking. In the cities they had agency, they could control their own lives, make choices about what they ate, how they dressed and how they did their hair. Their families remarked upon their return visits on how well dressed they were and how much more beautiful they looked. Almost all interviewed migrants from both industries perceived that they had achieved

improvements in different aspects of their lives due to migration. They mentioned for example that they have attained improvements in the types and places of work and the wages that they were able to earn:

... I was a student. I was single and have no children. I did not have a job. So here, my economic situation is fine and even better than my situation before... (19-year-old male migrant construction worker)

It was also reported by most that, even if their life is hard, they were pleased to have achieved economic independence from their families.

... my father died when I was a little boy. My mother was the only one who feeds and manages the whole family. Then I began working as a peddler and daily labourer. I even worked as a shepherd for rich farmers for 10 birr per month. After all that, I decided to move to Bahir Dar with my friend to get more money and help my family, finally Addis Ababa became my destiny. Certainly life is better in the city working in construction... (21-year-old male migrant construction worker)

However, in most cases, for reasons of low earnings, migrants find it almost impossible to save money or remit money to their households. There were a few migrants who stated that they were satisfied with their earnings and were able to earn a good income:

... it's good. I am paid good money; I get 30 birr per day, which is 900 birr per month. But I am still single... (25-year-old female migrant construction worker)

One or two of the migrants we spoke to stated that they have been able to continue their education in the city. However, most reported that their education had not progressed since migrating, as they were so busy working. Many were short of money in the city, so they could not afford to continue their education, and worked as much as they could to get by.

The widespread perception among migrants and their families that their lives had improved since they migrated was due to the access to education, health care, running water, food, and transportation in the cities. In the rural areas that they come from, these kind of services are rare. They see their standard of life as being of better quality in the urban areas.

... I was leading a life the same as other rural Ethiopians. We lack important services like water, electricity, education as it is far from the main road and others. Despite all these, rural culture is impressive and I miss the social gatherings during holidays... (40-year-old male migrant construction worker)

Consequently, better income levels, economic independence from families at the place of origin, a measure, however small, of agency, and better and improved quality of services in the cities were found to be the factors for migrants' perception

of material improvement and their improved socio-economic status. Despite this widespread perception, however, migration from Farta Woreda to Bahir Dar and Addis Ababa for construction and domestic work did not seem to lead to significant remittance flows among the migrants and households that we spoke to.

## 5. The impacts of migration

Most of the migrant households and migrants reported that there were no benefits to the household from their migration to the cities. Of the 39 migrants, only three sent money back to their households. Some of these sent regular cash, others occasional amounts, or they contributed televisions, clothes, school uniforms and towards the costs of education. Six of the migrants were able to make occasional contributions to the household or brought things for the household such as sugar or coffee. In many cases rural households had invested to finance the costs of migration and/or the migrants relied upon resources from the rural household to survive in the cities. This is a surprising finding, as the expectation from the literature is that rural to urban migration helps to support poor rural households through the sending of remittances (Massey *et al.* 1993). In many contexts migration and remittances play an important role in supporting rural livelihoods (Johnson and Stol 2008; Vathi and Black 2007).

### 5.1 Sending remittances

Most of the migrant families do not receive any kind of support from the migrants. The following quote from the sister of a female construction worker working in Addis Ababa is typical:

No she doesn't support us. She can't even improve herself, she have a baby to care for. She rent a house, and she is working as a construction worker. So under these circumstances she can't support us. (Sister of a female migrant construction worker 33)

As discussed in the previous section, some migrants were reported to have improved their own lives and those of their immediate families, but not those of the rural household and their extended family. The brother in law of a construction worker working in Addis Ababa reported that he had done well in the city:

From my perspective, it is possible to say that he has shown improvement. Previously, he was in difficulty to sustain his family even to satisfy the basic necessities of his family. Right now, he has no such problem. At the onset of his migration, he used to live in rented house. But now, he started to live in his house. He is also teaching his children in a better way. This is a great improvement for him and his family. Hence, his life in Addis Ababa is better than he used to live here. (Brother-in-law of a construction worker)

When they came to visit, migrants often brought things for their families and this was a form of occasional support for some families. This construction worker's mother listed the forms of support they got from their son who worked in Bahir Dar.



Not that much. But every time he comes to visit us he buys soap, sugar, coffee and other food items for us. He also buys the uniform and other educational materials for his young brothers and sisters. (Mother of a male construction worker in Bahir Dar)

For a few of the households, migrants to the cities were able to make a substantial contribution. Having a cousin working as a construction worker in Addis Ababa had transformed this family's house, enabled them to keep their children in school, and helped them avoid selling livestock to raise money to overcome problems:

Absolutely, he has improved his life and family as well. Starting an urban life by itself is an improvement. In addition, he has changed the house of his family to iron caged roof, sent money occasionally, and cover the educational expenses of his younger brothers. His parents used to sell domestic animals when they encounter a problem. Currently, they stopped doing so and the number of cattle they possess increases. As a result, I can say that my cousin's migration has brought significant improvements in different respects. (Cousin of a migrant construction worker in Addis Ababa).

This kind of story was the minority however. As indicated by other studies of migration in Ethiopia, such as de Brauw *et al.* (2013a), migration did not create a flow of remittances from urban workers to rural households. In the next section we examine the reasons why this is the case. As we described in section 4, one of the explanations migrants gave for this pattern is that the costs of migration and living in the city are high relative to the income. However, migrants also make strategic decisions that reduce their income in the short term, in the hope of positive outcomes in the long term. In the following sections we describe three of the strategies that migrants engage in, in the hope that they will lead to long-term changes in their lives, while in the short term they depress the flow of remittances. These are 'migration supported entrepreneurship', continuing education, and step migration.

## **5.2 Migration supported entrepreneurship**

The lack of access to capital was mentioned frequently as a barrier to opportunities in the rural areas. Several interviewees said that there were opportunities in the rural areas but that they lacked the capital and collateral to start their own business. Although these were not commonly reported cases, there were situations in which migrants used the money they earned to support small businesses in their villages or were saving and planning to start a business.

Using the money from remittances, the mother of a domestic worker in Addis Ababa had started their own business selling tea and coffee. Migration, said the widowed mother, was transforming both their lives:

She frequently send me 200 sometimes 300 birr/month to use it as a starting capital for business (for example to sell tea and coffee...). She migrates to

change her life as well as mine. Even if it is small, she is still sending me that much amount of money by saving the money that remains from buying soap and hair oil. (Mother of a domestic worker in Addis Ababa)

Another domestic worker, working in Bahir Dar, reported that she did not send remittances to her family as she was saving to start her own business in the future. This is one type of strategy that might mean that migrants do not remit money to their households:

For the time being I didn't do anything except buying some household materials when I go to visit them. Since I am working as a housemaid before beginning helping my family I am saving the money I get to begin my own business in the future. (18-year-old domestic worker in Bahir Dar)

### **5.3 Education and migration**

In the accounts of migrants, there were links between education and the decision to migrate. For many, failing exams and/or dropping out of school was one of a series of reasons why they migrated. For a few migrants, however, migration offered them the opportunity to continue their education, where they might otherwise had not been able. These stories were the exception rather than the rule, but they offer another non-economic reason why people might migrate and then not send remittances.

One domestic worker had left the village to go and work in Addis Ababa at the age of 14, when she was in Grade 6. The correct age for a Grade 6 student is 11 or 12, so she was already over the expected age for her grade. While working as a domestic worker she had continued her education, which meant not receiving a salary. She then passed her national exams and reached Grade 11.

My daughter was a grade six student before she migrated to Addis Ababa. She migrated at the age of 14. She used to look after herds. She was low achiever in her education since we were giving less emphasis for her education. Right now, she is working as a housemaid in Addis Ababa. She does not receive salary as a compensation for following her education. By now, she reaches grade 11 (father of a domestic worker in Addis Ababa).

Clearly, despite the investment that many households had made to finance migration, short-term financial gain was not the only motivation for some of these migrants and their households. Balancing life as a domestic worker and education was challenging, however, so some of those who had aspirations of continuing their education in the city found it difficult or were not able to find the time. The family of one domestic worker in Addis Ababa complained that her employers did not allow her time to pursue her education. Interestingly, they said that were planning to change her employers due to this problem.

... my daughter went to Addis at the age of 11 dropping her education. She used to help the family in different respects. Now, she is a housemaid in Addis

Ababa and has reinstated her education. But her employers make her busy and they don't allow her to pursue her education appropriately. She is in problem in this regard and we do have a plan to change her place of work if situations don't improve. (Father of a domestic worker in Addis Ababa)

Many of the young migrants saw migration as an opportunity to access or fund continuing education. The reality of long exhausting shifts as a construction worker or domestic worker in the city and the exploitative conditions of their work mitigated against this. However, education contributed significantly to many decisions to migrate, to the aspirations of migrants and to the lack of remittances sent. Migration seemed to offer migrants greater returns on their human capital than education. It is a risk taking strategy that has potential returns along with costs. The type of migration that was perceived to lead to the highest returns was migration to the Middle East, mainly of domestic workers.

#### ***5.4 The step migration project***

Many migrants from Farta Woreda migrate first to nearby towns and cities, such as Bahir Dar, and only then to Addis Ababa. Migration has costs, which make most of the more lucrative forms inaccessible to the very poor, so these steps are stages of raising the capital for the next phase in the journey. The ultimate aim of many migrants, and especially the female domestic workers, was to migrate to the Middle East to work. This type of migration was perceived to hold the most opportunity for truly transformative earning. Several people in rural households said that they did not know people who had managed to move out of poverty through internal migration, but that international migration presented these opportunities.

As far as I know, there is no anyone that shows progress in his life and family through migrating to either Addis Ababa or Bahir Dar. Of course, there are youths who change their life and family migrating to abroad, Arab emirates. (Divorced mother of a domestic worker in Addis Ababa)

The same migrant worker who was providing her mother with money to start a small business told her mother that in order to really change their lives, she would have to move to the Middle East. Her mother reported that her daughter had told her:

There is no change by working here [in Addis Ababa]. The salary we get as a domestic worker is only for survival and buying soap and clothes. It is not enough to bring change. So, I am planning to go to Arab countries but I have no money for the process. (Mother of a domestic worker in Addis Ababa)

Internal migration of the poor is presented by this ambitious young woman, as well as in some research, as 'only for survival'. However, as studies such as De Haan and Rogaly (2002) make clear, and as we discussed earlier, in these very poor contexts, survival, gaining a higher standard of living by moving to the city and escaping further impoverishment is an important and hard won achievement for many internal migrants.

One father reported that the reason that his daughter, a domestic worker in Addis Ababa, did not send them money was because she was a student and because she needed money to migrate to the Middle East. The daughter had migrated to Addis Ababa at the age of 11 to work as a domestic worker, and was now, a few years later, planning to migrate to the Middle East.

[She has not sent any money] yet since she is a student. I wish if she sends me. As a result, I am also insisting her to migrate to Arab Emirates since she could face a better condition than in Addis Ababa. But she is telling me that she needs more money to process her journey. (Father of a domestic worker in Addis Ababa)

International migration to places such as the Middle East, which offers higher returns than internal migration, requires a greater up-front investment, which is out of reach for the very poor residents of Farta Woreda. First they would migrate to the nearby cities, then save up money for the trip to Addis Ababa, and finally save the money needed to go abroad. This was mainly a route for female migrants hoping to work as domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries such as Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper reports three basic findings about rural to urban migration for domestic and construction work in Ethiopia. Firstly, extreme poverty in the rural area is the main driver of migration, creating conditions where young people migrate into occupations and situations that offer them very low wages and extremely hard conditions of employment, but are seen as an improvement on the other available options. Inadequate plot sizes of land for each family were identified by participants and in other research as a reason why rural households send migrants to the cities (World Bank 2010).

Secondly, once in the cities, although the conditions of their lives are tough, migrants and their families, on the whole, consider their standards of living to be higher. Access to good food, clothes, washing facilities and a measure of autonomy and dignity are important factors in this perception. Migrants in both professions suffered from insecure terms of employment. These were exacerbated by a lack of identity cards among rural-urban migrants, which made getting employment more difficult or expensive. Early marriage, violence and sexual abuse were found to be both drivers of migration for girls and women and realities of their employment in the cities, particularly for domestic workers.

Thirdly, we found that migrants do not remit much in cash or kind to their households. In the short term, their migration benefits the households only through the reduction in demand for household resources. These findings concur with most of the available research evidence on internal migration in Ethiopia such as de Brauw *et al.* (2013b) and World Bank (2010). In addition to the relatively low wages of

domestic workers and construction workers and the high costs of living in the cities, we identified three strategies that may explain low remittances, but there are undoubtedly others: using savings earned through migration to start a business; using migration to access or continue education; and using savings earned through migration to fund further migration to work in more lucrative, international locations. These point to longer-term strategies by migrants and/or their households to move out of poverty.

In a context of limited local opportunities for agricultural earning, other non-agricultural employment, or even of returns from education, migration represents the best form of investment for the rural poor. With small incremental investments, migrants can move from rural areas, where they earn little or nothing, to urban areas where they can earn more. The returns are very low in the short term, but the payoff is an improved standard of living and a chance that investment in business, education or further migration may pay dividends in the long run.

## References

- Berhanu, B. and White, M. (2000) 'War, famine, and female migration in Ethiopia, 1960–1989', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 49(1): 91-113.
- Clemens, M. and Ogden, T. (2013) *Migration as a Strategy for Household Finance: A Research Agenda on Remittances, Payments, and Development, Financial Access Initiative*. New York: New York University.
- Comenetz, J. and Caviedes, C. (2002) 'Climate variability, political crises, and historical population displacements in Ethiopia', *Environmental Hazards*, 4(4): 113-127.
- de Brauw, A., and Mueller, V. (2012) 'Do limitations in land rights transferability influence mobility rates in Ethiopia?' *Journal of African Economies*, 21(4): 548-579.
- de Brauw, A., Mueller, V. and Woldehanna, T. (2013a) 'Motives to remit: Evidence from tracked internal migrants in Ethiopia', *World Development*, 50: 13-23.
- de Brauw, A. Mueller, V. and Lee, H. K. (2013b) 'The role of rural–urban migration in the structural transformation of Sub-Saharan Africa', *World Development*, (in press), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.10.013>
- de Haan, A. and Rogaly, B. (2002) 'Introduction: migration workers and their role in rural change', *The Journal of Development Studies*, 38(5): 1-13.
- Food Economy Group (FEG) (2007) Amhara Livelihood Zone Reports, Farta Woreda South Gondor Administrative Zone, [online] available at: <http://www.feg-consulting.com/feg-shared-folder/liu/amhara/woreda-profiles/Farta.pdf> (accessed 23/06/2014)
- Gebeyehu, Z.H. (2013) 'Towards Improved Transactions of Land Use Rights in Ethiopia'. Paper presented on the 2013 *World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty*, Washington, DC.
- Gebeyehu, Z.H. (2014). 'Rural-Urban Migration in Land and Rural Development Policies in Ethiopia'. Presented for 2014 *World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty*, World Bank, Washington D.C., March 26-27 2014.

- Gibson, M. A. and Gurmu, E. (2012) 'Rural to urban migration is an unforeseen impact of development intervention in Ethiopia', *Plos One*, 7(11).
- Johnson, P. J. and Stoll, K. (2008) 'Remittance patterns of Southern Sudanese refugee men: Enacting the global breadwinner role', *Family Relations*, 57: 431-443.
- Massey, D.S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A. and Taylor, J.E. (1993) 'Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal', *Population and Development Review*, 19(3): 431-466.
- Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MOFED) (2012). 'Ethiopia's Progress towards Eradicating Poverty: An Interim Report on Poverty Analysis Study (2010/11) Development'. Addis Ababa, [online] available at: <http://www.mofed.gov.et/English/Resources/Documents/Interim%20Report%20on%202010-11%20Poverty%20Analysis.pdf> (accessed April 2014)
- Vathi, Z. and Black, R. (2007). *Migration and Poverty Reduction in Kosovo*. Free University of Brussels and Sussex Center for Migration Research.
- World Bank (2010) 'The Ethiopian Urban Migration Study 2008: The Characteristics, Motives and Outcomes of Migrants to Addis Ababa', Report No. 55731-ET, Washington: World Bank.
- World Food Programme (WFP) (2012) 'Factsheet - Ethiopia Productive Safety Nets Programme (PSNP)' World Food Programme: Addis Ababa, [online] available at: [www.wfp.org/sites/default/files/PSNP%20Factsheet.pdf](http://www.wfp.org/sites/default/files/PSNP%20Factsheet.pdf) (accessed May 2014)

## About the Migrating out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium

***Migrating out of Poverty*** is a research programme consortium (RPC) funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). It focuses on the relationship between migration and poverty – especially migration within countries and regions - and is located in five regions across Asia and Africa. The main goal of ***Migrating out of Poverty*** is to provide robust evidence on the drivers and impacts of migration in order to contribute to improving policies affecting the lives and well-being of impoverished migrants, their communities and countries, through a programme of innovative research, capacity building and policy engagement. The RPC will also conduct analysis in order to understand the migration policy process in developing regions and will supplement the world renowned migration databases at the University of Sussex with data on internal migration.

The ***Migrating out of Poverty*** consortium is coordinated by the University of Sussex, and led by CEO Professor L. Alan Winters with Dr Priya Deshingkar as the Research Director. Core partners are: the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) in Bangladesh; the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS) at the University of Ghana; the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore; the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa; and the African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC) in Kenya.

Migrating out of Poverty  
University of Sussex  
Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QN,  
United Kingdom

tel: +44 (0)1273 873535

email: [migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk)

web: <http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/>

Twitter: @migrationrpc

