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Circular migration between Ethiopia and the Gulf: Motivations, experiences, and return conditions

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1 List of acronyms

Catholic CVM	Catholic Comunità Volontari per il Mondo
ECC	Ethiopian Customs Commission
EDA	Ethiopian Diaspora Agency
EPHI	Ethiopian Public Health Institute
ERC	Ethiopian Red Cross
ESS	Ethiopian Statistical Service
ETB	Ethiopian Birr
FPC	Federal Police Commission (Ethiopia)
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ethiopia)
MoLS	Ministry of Labour and Skills (Ethiopia)
MoWSA	Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (Ethiopia)
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
NDRMC	National Disaster Risk Management Commission (Ethiopia)
NGO	Nongovernmental organisation
NISS	National Intelligence and Security Service (Ethiopia)
PEA	Private employment agencies
RRS	Refugees and Returnees Service
SNPRR	Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (Ethiopia)
TLM	Transport and Logistics Ministry (Ethiopia)
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front (Ethiopia)
UAE	United Arab Emirates

2 Executive summary

Ethiopia faces a cycle of migration and repatriation, with more migrants leaving the country than being repatriated. Migration issues persist as a result of growing insecurity in many parts of the country, high population growth, limited job opportunities and aspirations to a better life among young people. Despite the challenges they often face, many people who return to the country express a desire to re-emigrate. This makes deterring irregular migration difficult. The government of Ethiopia encourages migration because of its economic benefits and to attract diaspora investment. However, irregular migration prevails over regular migration.

Migrants in the Gulf countries are often subjected to mistreatment at the hands of the authorities, employers, agents, smugglers and other migrants. Lack of rights and access to justice for migrants in these countries have led to protection failures in which even legal migrants are treated as irregular or 'illegal'. Transnational criminal networks exploit vulnerable migrants, facilitating smuggling. Returnees and migration agents influence potential migrants' decision making. Abuse, including kidnap for ransom, violence and forced labour, is prevalent during migration. Some female migrants opt for regular routes to minimise risks, while males most often resort to irregular methods.

This study identifies the need to establish legal frameworks to protect migrants' rights and foster cooperation between governments to develop comprehensive migration policies and provide practical in-country solutions and collaboration between destination countries and the Ethiopian government.

Legal frameworks are fundamental to ensuring migrants' rights, safety and wellbeing. Collaboration between the Horn of Africa and Gulf states is crucial to addressing migration challenges collectively and aligning policies with regional dynamics. These frameworks may empower migrants by ensuring that they are better informed about their rights and protections. Frameworks can also improve data management for better follow-up of migrant citizens, and can be used to conduct risk awareness campaigns.

Repatriation and reintegration assistance for returnees in Ethiopia are inadequate, and this poses challenges for their social acceptance and reintegration. The government of Ethiopia has made efforts to improve the reception and repatriation process, by *inter alia* establishing reception centres and providing support services. Bilateral labour agreements have been signed with several Gulf countries, and preparations are underway to send a significant number of female domestic workers to Saudi Arabia officially. These agreements have helped reduce irregular migration. Although exploitation still occurs in the destination countries, the agreements eliminate abuses and exploitation during the journey and provide a mechanism for workers to bring complaints about abuses to the attention of government authorities. Migrants have the right to file complaints, and overseas embassies are mandated to follow up on these issues.

Recommendations are provided to all parties concerned with migration and repatriation through the migration and repatriation of migrants and returnees reception processes. While all the recommendations are important and interconnected, protecting the rights of migrants through legal frameworks lays the foundation for other measures, such as law enforcement and anti-trafficking efforts, awareness campaigns, cooperation with international agencies and support for returnees. There is a particular need to provide customised support and reintegration programmes for returnees. Effective legal frameworks serve as a fundamental pillar in safeguarding migrants' rights and ensuring their fairer treatment throughout the migration process.

3 Scope of the study

The objective of this study is to better understand the situation of migrants recently returned to Ethiopia, focusing on those who were forcibly evicted or who voluntarily repatriated themselves from the Gulf countries between 2020 and 2023. The study aims to provide answers to the following questions:

- (1) What decisions are being made regarding migration from Ethiopia?
 - a. What are the main regions/zones of origin of migrants from Ethiopia to the Gulf?
 - b. What were the socioeconomic, personal, security and/or political circumstances that led them to leave Ethiopia and emigrate to the Gulf?
 - c. How was their migration decision making motivated and articulated?
 - d. How well did migrants understand the journey they were undertaking and its opportunities and risks?

- (2) What are the living conditions and status of migrants in the Gulf before repatriation to Ethiopia?
 - a. What was the immigration status of migrants at their final location?
 - b. What were migrants' main sources of income at their final location?
 - c. How did migrants feel they were treated by their employer? In what ways did their employer assist with their official status or block them from obtaining a formal status during their stay?
 - d. How did migrants feel that they were treated by host communities? In what ways did host communities assist or block them from obtaining a formal status during their stay?
 - e. How did migrants feel that they were treated by national authorities? In what ways did national authorities assist or block them from obtaining a formal status during their stay?
 - f. With whom did migrants stay during their time abroad?
 - g. Where were migrants accommodated?
 - h. Were migrants satisfied with their living conditions?

- (3) What are the conditions for return to Ethiopia among migrants?
 - a. What were the motivations and resources of persons who decided to return to their home country without seeking external assistance? How did they arrange their travel?
 - b. What are the current legal and policy positions of the Gulf states, Djibouti and Ethiopia on forced repatriation?
 - c. Were migrants transported together with other cargo? What evidence, if any, is there of links between the movement of people and licit and illicit trade activities?
 - d. How much did migrants know about their rights during the deportation process? Who provided them with this information and where did they receive it?
 - e. Who are the smuggling and trafficking networks contracted to return the migrants? Are they identifiable and how do they work?
 - f. What can we learn from the testimonies of returning migrants to better understand the operation of smuggling and trafficking networks?

- (4) What experiences do migrants have upon returning to Ethiopia?
 - a. What is known about the age, gender, nationality and regions and zones of origin of migrants?
 - b. To which locations have returned migrants been dispatched?

- c. What risks do returning migrants face in terms of their access to transportation, the likelihood of being held in detention and their risk of being subjected to violence?
- d. What is the attitude and response of the authorities to returning migrants?
- e. How are returning migrants received by their families and communities?
- f. What other challenges do they encounter?

4 Statement of the problem

Our report aims to identify and analyse the cycle of the returnees' migration journey, from departure to return. Throughout the study, the terms 'smuggling' and 'trafficking' are used. What is the difference?

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime states that human trafficking and migrant smuggling are complex phenomena affecting people in various ways. Though sometimes linked, these are distinct crimes.

Human trafficking involves the recruitment, movement or harbouring of people for the purpose of exploitation – such as sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery or organ removal. In contrast to human trafficking which can take place both domestically and internationally, migrant smuggling is a crime that takes place only across borders. It consists in assisting migrants to enter or stay in a country illegally, for financial or material gain.¹

In Ethiopia, these phenomena are often perceived as a process evolving from smuggling to trafficking. Migrants typically begin their journeys as smuggled individuals entering or staying in a country illegally. However, during their journey, their status often changes to that of victims of human trafficking for the purpose of exploitation.

We often use the terms interchangeably, but there are important differences. Consent is the key issue: Migrants agree to being smuggled, while a trafficked person has been coerced. Smuggling involves transporting people illegally across an international border. Once the destination is reached, the business arrangement is normally concluded. Traffickers on the other hand can continue to exploit – through violence, fraud, or intimidation, taking advantage of a person's vulnerability...Along transport corridors like the southern route, there can be a mix of both smuggling and trafficking during the course of the journey.²

4.1 Circular migration between Ethiopia and the Gulf

For years, a growing number of reports has documented the mistreatment and severe abuse of migrants from the Horn of Africa by human traffickers at all stages of the migration journey. In 2020, European diplomats posted in Djibouti were alerted to the condition of Ethiopian migrants being off-

¹ <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/secondary/human-trafficking-and-migrant-smuggling.html>. [Accessed 1/3/2025]

² <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/11/22/ethiopia-south-africa-human-cost-neglected-south-south-migration-route>. [Accessed 1/3/2025]

loaded en masse north of Obock, having been returned mainly from Saudi Arabia via Yemen. These forced returns were allegedly commissioned by Saudi Arabia, despite there being a state of civil war in northern Ethiopia, and international borders being closed all over the world as a result of Covid-19. The motivation for the returns was reportedly the stigma placed on migrants because of the pandemic.

Controlling and repressing migrants based on minor offences or pretexts is a common practice in the Gulf. It is a regular occurrence that, when an issue arises, migrants are often blamed. After the 'Arab Spring' uprising in 2010–11, the mass arrest of migrants in Saudi Arabia became the norm. There was a fear within government that migrants could be exploited by opposition groups (individuals) for their agenda threatening to overturn the government. Consequently, periodic mass deportations of Ethiopian migrants to Ethiopia followed. According to a 2014 International Organization for Migration (IOM) report, between November 2013 and January 2014, 154,450 Ethiopian migrants were deported from Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia.³ Another similar crackdown took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to an Amnesty International report, in early 2020, the Houthi authorities in Yemen deported Ethiopian migrants from that country to Saudi Arabia because of the pandemic.⁴ At the same time, Saudi Arabian security services arrested many Ethiopian migrants on suspicion of being carriers of Covid-19, including pregnant women. According to an IOM report, Saudi Arabia deported 79,000 migrants in 2021, twice as many as in 2020 – at a time when Ethiopia was ill-prepared to accommodate the return of its citizens. The situation worsened as prolonged detention during the arrest and repatriation process led to increased Covid transmission,⁵ exacerbating the situation. However, the deportations were suspended for a lengthy period, for reasons as yet undisclosed, despite the migrants being kept in overcrowded prisons. In June 2021, Saudi Arabia deported 9,000 Ethiopian migrants and the following month deported another 32,000.⁶

In general terms, between May 2017 and December 2022, Saudi Arabia deported over half a million Ethiopian migrants, according to IOM.⁷ Between March 2022 and March 2023, Saudi Arabia conducted a post-Covid round-up of Ethiopian migrants and deported 131,642 of them, according to the Ethiopian government.⁸ For this purpose, the Ethiopian government spent ETB493 million

³ IOM (2014). 'Emergency post-arrival assistance to vulnerable Ethiopian migrants returning from Saudi Arabia [available at https://ethiopia.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1996/files/documents/External_Situation_Report_2014_JAN_10-17_Emergency_Post_Arrival_Assistance_to_Vulnerable_Ethiopian_Migrants-DRD_final_IN.pdf Accessed 1/3/2025]

⁴ Amnesty International, 'Saudi Arabia: "This is worse than COVID-19": Ethiopians abandoned and abused in Saudi prisons' [available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/3125/2020/en/> Accessed 1/3/2025]

⁵ MIDEQ (2020). <https://www.mideq.org/en/blog/impact-covid-19-flow-remittances-ethiopia-south-africa-migration-corridor/>. Accessed 1/3/2025]

⁶ IOM (2022). 'Return of Ethiopian migrants from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Annual Overview 2021)' [available at https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1701/files/documents/2023-08/iom_rdh_ksa_midyear_overview_2023.pdf Accessed 1/3/2025]

⁷ IOM (2023). 'Return of Ethiopian migrants from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Annual Overview 2022' [available at https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1701/files/documents/IOM_RDH_KSA_Annual_Overview_2022.pdf. Accessed 1/3/2025]

⁸ Fana Broadcasting Corporate (2023). 'Repatriation of Ethiopian migrants from Saudi ends after 131,642 citizens returned home' [available at [https://www.fanabc.com/english/repatriation-of-ethiopian-migrants-from-saudi-ends-after-131642-citizens-returned-home/#:~:text=Repatriation%20of%20Ethiopian%20migrants%20from%20Saudi%20ends%20after%20131%2C642%20citizens%20returned%20home,-On%20Apr%204&text=Addis%20Ababa%2C%20April%204%2C%202023,returned%20home%20since%20last%20year](https://www.fanabc.com/english/repatriation-of-ethiopian-migrants-from-saudi-ends-after-131642-citizens-returned-home/#:~:text=Repatriation%20of%20Ethiopian%20migrants%20from%20Saudi%20ends%20after%20131%2C642%20citizens%20returned%20home,-On%20Apr%204&text=Addis%20Ababa%2C%20April%204%2C%202023,returned%20home%20since%20last%20year.). Accessed: 1/3/2025]

(€12.325 million).⁹ The Ethiopian government's partners contributed an additional ETB50 million (€1.25 million) for the same purpose, according to the public relations head of the National Disaster Risk Management Commission (NDRMC). These amounts covered flight costs, temporary shelter construction, food, sanitation, local transportation and the limited assistance (cash in hand) provided to the returnees.

As Covid restrictions were gradually lifted during 2022 and 2023, a growing number of Ethiopian nationals began to be flown back from the Gulf to Ethiopia. During the pandemic, Ethiopian irregular migrants returning from Saudi Arabia and Yemen were transported by unregulated vessels (dhows) from northern Yemen and abandoned on the northern Djibouti beaches without water, food or any form of protection. The irony was that the networks of traffickers and smugglers taking Ethiopian migrants back to Africa were often reportedly the same as those who had originally lured and transported them from Ethiopia to the Gulf, via northern Djibouti and Yemen.

While there is extensive research on migrants' migration routes and experiences upon arrival in the Gulf, there is limited information on what happens to them after they are returned to Ethiopia. The ongoing insecurity, political and socioeconomic tensions in the country have given rise to an information deficit on the situation of returning migrants. Hence, this study aims to examine the conditions of migrants' return to Ethiopia and their status and experiences once back in the country. It highlights how the international relations and the ongoing conflict, political insecurity and degraded economics in Ethiopia are exacerbating the challenges faced by migrants returning from the Gulf states. Testimonies from Ethiopians who have returned voluntarily, under coercion or with the help of IOM, other organisations and the Ethiopian authorities provide direct insight.

5 Methodology

Twenty-five returning migrants and officials were interviewed for this study in the following regions: Addis Ababa, Amhara (Dessie), Jimma (Oromiya), Tigray and SNNPR–Hosaena. The lead interviewer held meetings with officials from the MoFA, MoWSA and MoLS. The interviewer also contacted an official from NDRMC and observed two migrant reception centres (Wosen I and II).

The study faced significant challenges in identifying, convincing and selecting returning migrants for the interviews. These challenges included overcoming language barriers, managing varying interview durations, engaging with officials experiencing 'interview fatigue' and persuading potential interviewees to share their experiences willingly. To address these obstacles, a combination of methods was employed. It involved visiting government offices in Addis Ababa and collaborating with officials in different sub-cities, including Yeka, Bole, Lemi Kura and Addis Ketema, to obtain an official list of returnees. However, the initial list proved disorganised and lacked information about recent returnees. Therefore, an alternative approach involving snowball sampling was adopted. This involved leveraging the lead interviewer's networks and contacts to identify potential interview candidates.

Ultimately, 18 returnees were identified in Addis Ababa, while additional interviews were conducted in temporary shelters located in Yeka sub-city. In Jimma, Hosaena and Dessie, collaboration with officials from the Zonal Labour and Social Affairs Bureau facilitated the identification of potential

⁹ Exchange rate based on 2020 average rate according to Exchange-rates.org: one Ethiopian birr = €0.025. [<https://www.exchange-rates.org/exchange-rate-history/etb-eur-2020>. Accessed: 1/3/2025]

candidates for interview. In addition, interviews were conducted with government officials from various ministries, personnel from organisations such as the IOM and the Ethiopian Red Cross (ERC), and contacts at the NDRMC. These diverse methods, and the involvement of different stakeholders, allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the experiences and perspectives of returnee migrants in Ethiopia.¹⁰

All potential candidates were informed about the study's purpose. They were specifically asked for their informed consent, and care was taken to ensure that respondents understood the conditions of the interview, their rights as respondents, their willingness to be interviewed, the possibility of stopping the interview and their right to withdraw their interview at any time. Next, the lead interviewer cross-checked the proposed list of interview candidates with the research coordinator to determine validity and to arrive at a final decision about whether to interview them. Upon confirmation, the lead interviewer carried out the interviews. In Addis Ababa, ten persons were finally selected.

In Jimma, Hosaena and Dessie, the lead interviewer met officials from the Zonal Labour and Social Affairs Bureau with direct responsibility for and experience of the reception and reintegration of returnees. Returnee registration and documentation in these three zones were of better quality than in Addis Ababa. The officers were more cooperative. They helped with identifying and locating candidate returnees. After receiving the lists of the potential returnee candidates, the lead interviewer and research coordinator followed the same review and selection process as in Addis Ababa. The Jimma Zone Labour and Social Affairs officer provided the lead interviewer with detailed information for 25 returned migrants of diverse backgrounds. Eight of these individuals were interviewed.

In Hosaena, the lead interviewer potentially had access to a database covering nearly 600 migrant returnees' data who were registered and attending training about migrating to Saudi Arabia. Five returned migrants who wanted to legally immigrate to Saudi Arabia under the official project of sending 500,000 housemaids were interviewed.¹¹ Two other interviewees were from Dessie. Following the interviews, the lead interviewer and the research coordinator withdrew four other interviews from analysis because of their low quality and, in one case, a language barrier between the interviewer and interviewee: the two from Dessie and two from Jimma.

The interviews in Dessie could not be conducted by the lead interviewer as a result of time constraints and security concerns. Another professional from Wollo University was recruited to conduct the interviews. He interviewed four returnee migrants. The interviewer was given a comprehensive orientation, together with all necessary documents, including English–Amharic translated questionnaires. However, the first two interviews were of poor quality. They were considered a 'rehearsal', testing the interview process, and were not included in the 25 completed interviews and research analysis.

To substantiate and triangulate the data collection from returnees, the lead interviewer also interviewed five government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Ministry of Labour and Skills (MoLS) and the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA), at the federal and zonal

¹⁰ Neuman, W. (2014). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

¹¹ 'Ethiopia recruits 500,000 women for domestic work in Saudi Arabia'. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/4/17/ethiopia-recruits-500000-women-for-domestic-work-in-saudi-arabia#:~:text=This%20time%2C%20the%20Ethiopian%20government,to%20work%20as%20domestic%20workers>. Accessed: 1/3/2025]

levels. All those interviewed had official functions regarding returning migrants, and direct knowledge of policies and practices in migration and returnee migrants affairs. Moreover, the lead interviewer contacted the NDRMC and their two reception centres. Migration specialist personnel from IOM and the ERC were also interviewed.

5.1 Interview selection criteria for returnee migrants

The following criteria were used to guarantee as wide a spectrum of migrant situations and experiences as possible.

General demographic variation

1. Representatives from diverse religious backgrounds (Muslim, Orthodox, Protestant and others).
2. Representatives from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Amhara, Oromo, Tigrayan, Hadiya, Gurage and others).
3. Broad gender and age representation.

Variation in migration experiences and statuses

1. Irregular migrants – migrants who went to the Middle East through means not legally sanctioned (by vehicle, foot and boat).
2. Those who started their journeys as legal migrants but became irregular migrants along the way through being subjected to exploitation – especially those who were held in prisons in the Gulf countries until they could pay for their release.
3. Migrants with success stories while in the Gulf vs those with stories of failure, troubles and deportation from the Gulf.
4. Individuals who had taken part in forced and/or voluntary repatriation to their country of origin at different periods.
5. Individuals who passed through mandatory reception centres after repatriation.
6. Individuals who reported being kidnapped by armed groups in Yemen and returned to Ethiopia.
7. Individuals using different modes of return. The majority of migrants returned to Ethiopia by plane. However, others also returned from Yemen by boat, and then travelled overland by train and bus. This criterion was added to take into consideration these specific migrants.
8. Returnees whose conditions in Ethiopia were ‘good’ vs those who were in trouble or dependent on their family.

5.2 Nationality, regions, age and gender of interviewed migrants

As shown in Table 1 the participants in this study originated from five epicentres of migration. Migration from Tigray Region is primarily driven by economic factors that have been further exacerbated by the civil conflict in the region. In Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR), economic challenges, including issues related to land shortage, contribute to a culture of mobility and migration among the local population.

Table 1: Regions of origin of the research participants and ethnicity of respondents

Region of origin	Percentage	Ethnicity of respondents	Percentage
Oromiya	36	Oromo	32
Tigray	24	Tigrayan	24
SNNPR – Hosaena	20	Hadiya	20
Addis Ababa	12	Mixed	
Amhara (Dessie)	8	Amhara	16
		Gurage	4
		Kefa	4
Total	100		100

Table 2. Destination of respondents

Country migrated to	Percentage
Saudi Arabia	52
United Arab Emirates	12
Lebanon	12
Kuwait	8
Yemen	4
Libya	4
Unknown	8
Total	100

The returnees who participated in this study were predominantly young, with 60% under 30 years old. Both men and women migrated to the Middle East. However, 60% percent of the interviewees were female. Fifty-two percent of the research participants had migrated legally, but nearly half of them later acquired an illegal status. Thirty-six percent of the respondents migrated through illegal routes and 12% had migrated in a semi-legal way.¹² Two returnees had been arrested at the border between Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The majority of returnees – 60% – were forcefully repatriated, whereas 40% voluntarily returned to Ethiopia. Forty percent of the returnees reported that they wanted to re-migrate. Twenty percent of the interviewees reported basing their future decision to re-migrate as dependent on certain conditions and the remaining 40% said that they did not want to

¹² Semi-legal migration involves employers or recruiters facilitating migrants' entry into a country using tourist visas, with the intention of using them as domestic servants. Many migrants are not aware that they are travelling using this type of visa.

leave Ethiopia again. The majority of the returning migrants (52%) had come back to Ethiopia very recently and were the beneficiaries of the government's March 2022–23 repatriation project.

6 Literature review of regular and irregular migration

An April 2023 World Bank Group report on *Migrants, Refugees and Societies* presents a comprehensive overview of the socioeconomic outcomes of voluntary and forced return of migrants to their country of origin (World Bank, 2023). According to the report, voluntary return is associated with better socioeconomic outcomes than forced return. However, this is contingent on various factors such as the countries of origin and destination, as well as the reasons for return. Furthermore, the report highlights that even migrants who have the legal right to work may face circumstances that compel them to leave, as was the case in many countries with the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences.

In April 2023, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC, 2023) released a report providing a gendered baseline assessment of the major challenges faced by Ethiopian migrants returning from the Gulf. The report highlights that a majority of returnees were facing financial insecurity upon their return to Ethiopia. Additionally, while most of the returnees interviewed did not intend to migrate again in the next 12 months, less than a year had passed since their return, indicating the need for a longer-term analysis of returnees' reintegration processes. The report emphasises the need for gender-specific reintegration processes. Women returnees faced unique challenges, including being rejected as a marriage partner and forced to be self-reliant. Unlike men, they had to navigate life without any support from their family.

The MMC Snapshot, which focused on Ethiopian returnees who migrated specifically to Saudi Arabia, permits a better understanding of how their experience during migration might influence their willingness to encourage others to migrate (MMC, 2023). The report indicates that a majority were unlikely to recommend migration; this was linked to the fact that almost all of them were held in detention in Saudi Arabia and faced extreme conditions. Other studies from the MMC have indicated that Ethiopian migrants in Somalia were mainly encouraged to undertake their journeys by returnees' success stories. This suggests that returnees may exaggerate the positive aspects of their experiences while telling others about them.

The researchers also reviewed a report published by the Research and Evidence Facility (REF) and Samuel Hall which analyses in depth the return mechanisms and reintegration processes in South Sudan (REF & Samuel Hall, 2023). This analysis provides a starting point for comparison with the case of Ethiopia. The report enriches the concept of return by defining it in the South Sudan context as "pendular, partial and transitory". Return is often undertaken temporarily or conditionally for people to investigate the conditions in the areas of return, and therefore not as a definitive state. This allows for more nuance when considering return in a long-term perspective, which in turn can inform the development of more adapted reintegration measures. In this regard, the report states that a narrow focus on individual reintegration instead of on community-based reintegration may lead to a failed reintegration process. It is therefore important to understand the returnees' whole environment in order to put adequate measures in place.

Reintegration efforts in the Horn of Africa are partly reviewed in a September 2022 REF report on *The Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees* (Okoth, 2022). This study notes that there is a lot of conversation and willingness to improve on migration policies in the region but there has not yet been much concrete implementation. This is partly linked to capacity gaps, limited coordination, a

lack of involvement from local stakeholders in general and a lack of monitoring mechanisms. Coordination efforts are hindered by the fact that ministries are working in 'silos', something which can be observed in Ethiopia. The conflict that affected northern Ethiopia from November 2020 to November 2022 was also an important factor in delaying implementation of reintegration activities. The review concludes that returnees do not hold a central place in the progress made in terms of policy implementation in the region.

Not only did the conflict in northern Ethiopia hamper implementation efforts but it was also identified by the IOM's 'Ethiopia Crisis Response Plan' as one of the main factors affecting the returnees' needs (IOM, 2023a). The insecurity made it impossible for many people to return to their home communities. In addition, the Response Plan lays out a general picture of the efforts provided by IOM in Ethiopia, which can be compared with the reality on the ground as experienced by Ethiopian returnees interviewed for the present study.

The researchers also aimed to review literature on the various routes taken by migrants who return to Ethiopia. A March 2023 IOM report on *Migration along the Eastern Corridor* provides numbers on migration through different routes, as well as returns from Saudi Arabia (IOM, 2023b). However, this only accounts for voluntary humanitarian returns, carried out by air, which leaves a gap regarding migrants who return to Ethiopia through other (illegal) routes. In order to understand the potential impact of these types of journeys on returnees' experiences, the team referred to the March 2023 Ravenstone Consult report, which offers a better understanding of the smuggling and trafficking mechanisms that take place along the Eastern Route to Yemen and Saudi Arabia (Ravenstone Consult, 2023). This is presented as a uniquely high-volume route subject to systematic violations, which in turn affect the returnees' environment in a multidimensional and intergenerational way. The report also highlights the lack of knowledge about the extent to which proper assistance is provided to those who need it.

The available literature offers insights on return migration and into some aspects of the specific experiences of Ethiopian returnees from the Gulf. However, it lacks a deeper analysis of their reintegration processes.

7 Exploring Ethiopian legal and irregular migration: Experiences of departure, journey and return to Ethiopia

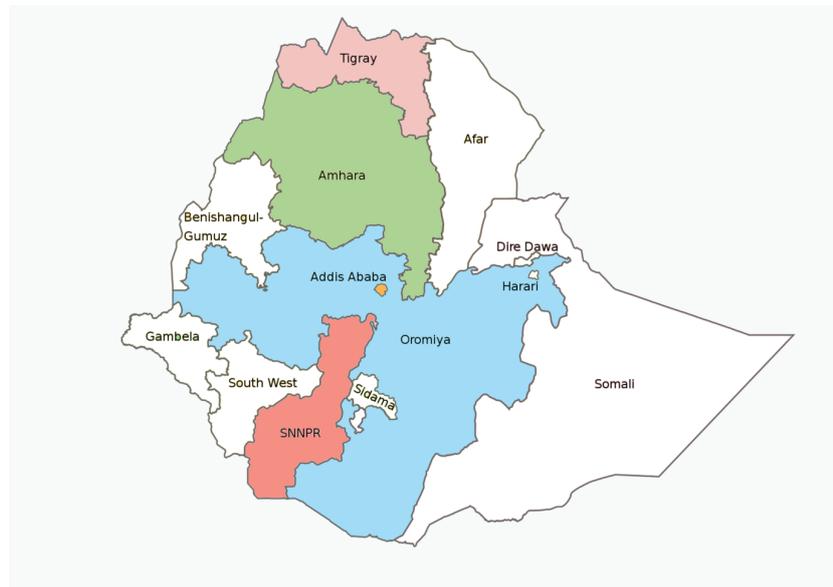
7.1. Decisions regarding migration departure from Ethiopia

Significant Ethiopian migration to the Gulf countries started in response to the oil boom in the region in 1973. The Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait, experienced a surge in demand for labour in various sectors, particularly the construction, pasture and farming, domestic work and hospitality sectors. As a result, Gulf countries began to recruit workers from Ethiopia. Until the late 1980s, Ethiopian migrants returning home brought with them resources seen as enormous wealth in the Ethiopian context, as well as tales of harmonious and mutually respectful relations with their hosts. This situation has changed significantly in recent years as a result of the increasing number of irregular migrants and related harmful activities.

Economic insecurities such as poverty and un- or underemployment are the main reasons why many people leave Ethiopia. The country's rapidly growing population and high proportion of young people make it difficult even for those with college degrees to find stable employment. Conflicts, instability and climate change (drought and floods) are other reasons for youth to migrate. While most migrants are fleeing violence, persecution and a bleak socioeconomic future, a minority are seeking reunification with family members and education abroad. The availability of work and better salaries in Saudi Arabia also entices believers who initially travel for the Hajj and Umrah rituals to then stay in the country to seek jobs.

Regions of origin

Figure 1: Regions of origin from which most migrants to the Gulf countries originate



Developed by the authors

Southwestern Oromia (Jimma)

Jimma, situated in the southwestern region of Oromia, stands as the largest city of the region and acts as a pivotal hub for commerce and services in western Oromia. Consequently, residents from the surrounding areas gravitate towards the city for a plethora of reasons, resulting in overcrowding. The region has emerged as a major hub for emigration, with many migrants travelling from Jimma to Saudi Arabia because of the large Muslim community in the region and historical ties between Jimma and Saudi Arabia in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹³ The pilgrimage to Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, known as the Umrah, is a significant event that has strengthened the affiliation between Muslims in Jimma and Saudi Arabia, making it an important driver of emigration.

Migrants from Jimma typically travel to Addis Ababa before joining one of the migration routes, taking advantage of the city's location and transportation networks. Jimma's geographic proximity to the SNNPR also draws many migration candidates from this area.

In addition, Jimma's officials are known for their more effective organisation, in terms of migration knowledge, management and relations with migrants, in comparison with other regions assessed in this study. Jimma's efficacy can be attributed to several factors. First, officials excel in registration processes, especially for returnees, ensuring a comprehensive record of individuals. Second, they provide valuable training to migrants, equipping them with essential skills and knowledge. Additionally, they maintain a robust system for tracking and apprehending traffickers, often resulting in their incarceration. Ultimately, their effectiveness is most evident in their successful repatriation efforts. According to our interviewees, Jimma fosters a strong sense of community where everyone

¹³ Historical ties between the King of Saudi Arabia and the King of Jimma, Abba Jifar II. See more at 'Ethiopia: King Abba Jifar II of Jimma's palace, mosque, tomb and related tangible and intangible heritages' [available at <https://allafrica.com/stories/201503030229.html#:~:text=Even%20before%201882%2C%20Abba%20Jifar,from%20leaders%20of%20various%20countries>]. Accessed: 1/3/2025]

knows each other's stories and journeys in life, and would-be migrants are inspired by the stories (true or fabricated) that migrants return to the area with. These factors have contributed to making Jimma a key centre for migration in the region.

Tigray

According to IOM records (April 2023), 7% of all Ethiopian migrants to the Gulf are from the northern region of Tigray, making it the region with the highest proportion of migrants relative to its population, rather than having the highest number of migrants in absolute terms. During the Ethiopian civil war (1975–91), the percentage of Tigrayans among migrants was significantly higher.

The region has a long history of frequent droughts, conflict and war. The scarcity of land available for the younger generation, combined with land degradation and reduced productivity, has contributed to the growing issue of diminishing agricultural opportunities. Additionally, the region's relatively high level of urbanisation has fostered a culture of mobility and the pursuit of alternative livelihoods.

Tigray has experienced various forms of conflict, including the armed struggle led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the 1970s and 1980s, the Eritrea–Ethiopia war in 1998–2001 and the recent 2020–22 civil war with the central government of Ethiopia. These prolonged periods of conflict have led to a deterioration in the economy, continuous drafting of youth for military purposes and a high rate of internal and international migration.

During this research, we encountered migrant returnees who had been deported from Saudi Arabia and placed in reception centres because of the continuing blockade of Tigray. When the reception centres issued orders for the Tigrayan returnees to vacate, as the centres needed to accommodate new arrivals, returning migrants faced a dilemma, with nowhere to go. Confronted by this difficulty, many of the returnees made the difficult decision to embark on another migration journey, taking their chances in search of a place to settle abroad. Some returnees from Tigray were reportedly taken straight to prison by the government upon their return to Ethiopia. These incidents, along with the absence of economic opportunities, have led to a high rate of migration and re-migration as many feel they have no other option.

Tigray's proximity to the Red Sea provides a short route for migration by sea. The combination of a fast-growing population, a high mobility culture and the absence of job opportunities has further fuelled migration from Tigray, both internally and internationally.

SNNPR–Hosaena

The southern region of Ethiopia, particularly the city of Hosaena, in Hadiya Zone, has a high rate of internal and international migration. People in SNNPR face a shortage of land relative to their population. The scarcity of available land in this region compels a significant portion of its population to adopt a mobile lifestyle, even within the boundaries of the nation. The region holds significance as the birthplace of the Gurage people, renowned throughout Ethiopia for their entrepreneurial skills and thriving businesses. They establish their enterprises in various locations across the country, thereby spreading their influence far and wide. Consequently, migration at a young age is a prevalent phenomenon in this region, deeply rooted in its culture and esteemed as a commendable practice. Economic opportunities and cultural considerations stand as the primary driving forces behind migration in this region.

Thanks to its geographic location in the south of the country and to historical family ties and friendships, migration from SNNPR is primarily directed towards Southern Africa. More men than women choose to migrate to South Africa; women from the region mostly choose to migrate to the

Gulf. Religion also plays a part: most Christians opt for migration to South Africa, whereas Muslims choose the Gulf.

Migration from SNNPR is socially supported by the community. Families who send their children abroad are respected, and the more children a family sends, the higher their social status becomes. Their reputation is also positively associated with their children's success abroad.¹⁴

However, if a migrant returns home with different social habits, such as smoking cigarettes or a hookah, sagging (trousers worn below the waist, often exposing underwear) or displaying hip-hop-style characteristics acquired from their time in South Africa, they may face social rejection by their community. As a result, some members of society view these migrants as a cultural threat and perceive them as polluting the local culture.

Amhara: Dessie¹⁵

Dessie is the capital city of the former Wello district and one of the biggest cities of Amhara regional state. Dessie, like Addis Ababa, is home to many legal and illegal migrant agencies, making it another epicentre of migration within Ethiopia. Irregular migration from Dessie often begins with neighbouring countries. Dessie's proximity to Djibouti and knowledge of the route to Saudi Arabia further encourage this tendency towards irregular migration. Despite Dessie being home to a significant number of Christians, the population is predominantly Muslim, and most migrants are Muslims as a result of religious connections.

Addis Ababa

Addis Ababa, the largest city in Ethiopia and the national capital, boasts a thriving economy that attracts the majority of the country's population thanks its size and economic opportunities. The city also serves as a hub for international communities and universities, allowing for a prominent foreign influence in its culture and characteristics. Many Ethiopian citizens internally migrate to the city from rural areas and secondary cities in search of employment, education, construction projects, service work and domestic employment, all with the aim of improving their quality of life.

Once people settle in the capital, particularly the young, returning to their villages of origin is a challenge. The city's vibrant atmosphere and living conditions have a profound influence on them. Consequently, many individuals choose to stay, even though living conditions in Addis Ababa, as in most large cities, present their own set of challenges.

Addis Ababa initially attracts internal migrants by offering opportunities for advancement, but adjusting to life in the city is not without its difficulties. Those who manage to navigate the challenges successfully can greatly improve their lives. However, for those unable to take advantage of employment opportunities or to cope with the demands of city life, Addis Ababa can be unforgiving, leading to a sense of personal disillusionment and social exclusion.

¹⁴ MIDEQ (nd). <https://www.mideq.org/en/resources-index-page/the-entanglement-between-tangible-and-intangible-factors-in-shaping-hadiya-migration-aspirations-to-south-africa/>; <https://www.mideq.org/en/blog/ethiopia-to-south-africa-the-human-cost-of-a-neglected-migration-route/>; and <https://www.mideq.org/en/blog/remittances-and-transformations-funerary-practices-among-hadiya/> [Accessed 1/3/2025].

¹⁵ Migration from rural areas is more common than from the cities. However, the migration role of Jimma, Hosaena, Dessie and Addis Ababa is highlighted here as they represent Ethiopia's major migration hubs.

As a main departure point for regular migration, Addis Ababa is strategically positioned, with its international airport and regional and international hub status. However, the city's diverse and highly populous society, including a high percentage of young people, makes it an attractive target for human traffickers. These perpetrators can easily navigate the city's underground network, which operates like a crime syndicate, to hide and manipulate potential victims. They take advantage of the city's ever-growing population to remain concealed, evading administration offices and operating undetected.

Drivers of migration

Migration from Ethiopia arises from four main drivers. The primary driver is socioeconomic, followed by the conflicts and growing insecurity that affect various aspects of life. The third driver is the 'migration culture' that has developed since the 1970s. The fourth stems from young people's aspirations to achieve wealth and acquire material possessions, often influenced by exposure to the internet and social media content.

In addition to these, Ethiopia is currently facing its worst drought in four decades, a weak economy, high inflation and widespread violence. The ongoing contention between the government and the Tigray region, involving Eritrea and Sudan, as well as insurgencies in other regions, has led to destitution, instability and insecurity. These factors have resulted in internal and cross-border displacements, intensifying international migration and creating a favourable environment for human traffickers.

Ethiopia's proximity to oil-rich countries in the Gulf region is a significant pull factor, as migrants hope to take advantage of better living conditions and employment opportunities with higher pay, attracting individuals seeking a better life.

Historical periods of significant migration in Ethiopia include the 'Red Terror' (1976–78) during the rule of the Derg regime, which led many people to flee the country. Additionally, the severe drought and civil war in the north of the country during 1984–85 drove many Ethiopians to seek refuge abroad, the majority in Sudan. Many migrants from those times who fled to the Gulf eventually returned home with a certain amount of wealth. These historical links and the memory of the positive aspects of migration to the Gulf continue to have a significant influence on contemporary migration decisions.

National dimension of migration drivers

The decision to migrate is influenced by various factors, including the need to escape from difficult economic, political or social realities. The diminishing value of high school and university diplomas in gaining employment and affording a living is also a contributing factor. Supporting family members through remittances and the desire to raise enough money to buy land and build a house are additional motivations for migration. In some cases, children may hide their migration plans from their families, while, in others, families may actively encourage, support and finance the migration of their children.

Socioeconomic conditions play a pivotal role in encouraging migration in Ethiopia. The country's economy relies heavily on agriculture. This sector employs traditional farming techniques and most land plots are small and unproductive. Farmers struggle to sustain their own livelihoods and provide for their children's education, as the lack of land and the unaffordability of fertilisers hinder agricultural productivity. Similarly, some urban dwellers face destitution, with limited job

opportunities and low wages, enhancing the appeal of migration as an alternative for individuals to support themselves and their families.

In contrast, the Gulf countries present an economic structure and employment opportunities, attracting Ethiopian migrants with the lure of higher wages and improved living conditions. The significant disparity in pay for similar skills and the economic pull of the Gulf region increase the push factors driving migration and contribute to the decision to migrate and re-migrate.

Moreover, Ethiopia's economic policies inadvertently encourage migration by offering benefits to Ethiopians living abroad who return as part of the diaspora. Tax exemptions, free or discounted land for investment (though its realisation may vary), housing opportunities and foreign hard-currency accounts are provided to diaspora members, fostering an environment that many see as favouring returnees over Ethiopian citizens residing within the country. These policies, coupled with the high cost of living and limited prospects for youth, contribute to feelings of poverty and despair among the population.

Migration is not solely driven by despair: a deep-rooted culture of migration for material gain, along with competition among families and relatives, and peer pressure, significantly influences the decision to migrate. Those who have achieved tangible wealth and higher social status after migrating to the Gulf decades ago serve as powerful examples motivating others to migrate. These success stories create a culture of migration. Migrants, both legal and illegal, send remittances home to support their families. Remittances are often seen as a lure for others to migrate, as they are widely discussed and demonstrate positive changes in recipients' lives.

While many migration candidates are aware of the risks involved in irregular migration, they are still willing to trade their lives for the hope of a better life. Positive migration stories are spread through social media, the internet and the accounts of successful returnees. However, returnees may exaggerate their experiences to maintain their reputation, as they may face suspicion from family and the wider community if they return without capital. The motivation to migrate is driven not only by ignorance or extreme poverty, but by the pursuit of a better life at any cost. The stories of previous successful migrants act as a beacon of hope for those seeking change, regardless of the challenges and risks they may face. The decision to migrate is ultimately driven by individuals' attitudes, with some willing to risk everything, including their lives, to improve their current circumstances rather than endure the challenges they face at home.

As a result, Ethiopian migrants often encounter challenges related to limited knowledge of and access to legal and social services that could address their needs and protect them from exploitation, abuse and human rights violations.

International dimension of migration drivers

The geopolitical location of Ethiopia in East Africa, neighbouring the oil-rich countries of the Gulf, has had a major influence on migration patterns. The emergence of non-state actors in Yemen and Libya has facilitated the activities of traffickers and encouraged migrants to undertake the journey. The creation of porous borders, particularly through Yemen to Saudi Arabia, has attracted both traffickers and migrants, despite the risks involved.

One key factor driving migration to the Gulf is the substantial difference in payment for equivalent skills compared with Ethiopia. In interviews, respondents noted that domestic workers in the Gulf can earn between US\$150 and \$300 per month, while in Ethiopia the average labour wages range from US\$20 to \$30. The Gulf countries have a demand for low-skilled, low-wage domestic workers (although low wages in these countries are considered high in the Ethiopian context). This economic

disparity and the prospect of a better life and improved economic conditions attracts migrants from Ethiopia and neighbouring countries.

Remittances play a significant role in Ethiopia's economy, with a substantial amount of hard currency coming from the Gulf. In turn, Ethiopia seeks to address its staggering unemployment rate and acquire much-needed hard currency.¹⁶ To facilitate this, the country has engaged in bilateral agreements with Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, to send Ethiopian migrants abroad.

Globalisation, technological advances and easy transportation have made migration more accessible. Migrants can communicate easily and cheaply with their friends and family back home, exchanging information to facilitate migration. Traffickers and irregular migrants also have easy access to information to evade border security. The presence of a large number of migrants in the Gulf creates a pull effect for other migrants, both through their mere presence and through the financial support, assistance in obtaining permits and job-brokerage services they provide.

Overall, the combination of economic disparities, demand for labour in the Gulf countries, remittances, and global interconnectedness has contributed to the significant migration flow from Ethiopia to the Gulf.

Migration decision making

The process of migration from Ethiopia involves varying lengths of time and different steps. While some migrants make abrupt decisions to migrate within days, often as a result of peer pressure or educational failure, the majority go through a longer process that can take months or years. For example, in the case of the Tigray region, the outbreak of war in November 2020 led to sudden decisions to migrate. One of the returnees, who originally migrated from Tigray, said:

I made the decision to migrate in less than a month in order to flee the war. I based my decision on the accounts of my neighbours who were also seeking to migrate, as well as other individuals who had already returned from migration.¹⁷

Migrants typically engage in preparations well in advance. They start first by obtaining an identity card at the *kebele* (local neighbourhood) level, then securing a national passport. In some cases, migrants falsify their age and use corrupt channels to obtain an adult identity card, and thus a passport. Some migrants change part of their name and religious identity to improve their recognition status in the Gulf. Muslim migrants get preference from their prospective employer in the Middle East thanks to their religious ties. They save money for the journey and sell their belongings, including livestock, grain, land and houses, to acquire funds for the cost of migration. Many prepare food rations for their trip. Some deposit emergency funds with trusted relatives at home, to be used in case of an incident.

Migrants gather information from a range of sources, including relatives, neighbours, friends and other migrants living abroad. They also learn from returned or deported migrants whom they meet at social gatherings or while consuming khat, a stimulant plant. Private migration agencies, both legal and illegal, also play a significant role in providing migration information and influencing

¹⁶ As an indication of this, the government is working to send 500,000 Ethiopians to Saudi Arabia. In the first half of 2024, it sent more than 180,000 Ethiopians overseas. 'Ethiopia makes strides in formalizing overseas labor migration, says labor & skills minister'. Ethiopian News Agency (ENA). https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/eng_4125002. Accessed 1/3/2025.

¹⁷ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 03.

migrants' decision-making processes. Legal migrants who choose to migrate through formal channels undergo training, competence examinations and medical tests. A returnee from Hosaena said:

My aspiration before migrating was to pursue my education. Unfortunately, my dreams of a better future were dashed when I failed my tenth-grade exam. Consequently, within a few days of receiving my tenth-grade results, I took the painful decision to migrate in search of new opportunities.¹⁸

Some semi-legal migrants may skip the training and competence exams, prioritising quick migration but risking their legal status in the destination country. Another returnee from Jimma stated:

I decided to migrate in less than a week. My main source of information was a local trafficker who had previously resided in Sudan and had returned to Jimma to recruit and transport Ethiopian migrants from there to Sudan. This trafficker convinced me to make a quick decision and join the trafficking trip.¹⁹

Migrants who make sudden decisions often follow irregular migration routes because they have limited time for passport processing and lack financial resources. Obtaining a passport in Ethiopia typically takes a minimum of three months and incurs costs of ETB2,000 (€50). Government suspensions of passport and identity card delivery aimed at preventing corruption, and misuse of Ethiopian passports by non-citizens may threaten the country's national security and contribute to irregular migration decisions. Regular migration routes require better finances and the patience to wait for the completion of the immigration, residency and work permit arrangements necessary between Ethiopia and the Gulf destination. Migrants are mostly aware of the risks associated with irregular migration, yet many are still willing to accept those risks in pursuit of their decision to migrate, regardless of the financial costs and personal dangers involved.

An interview with an official of the Social Affairs Bureau from the Hadiya Zone revealed a troubling case. He reported that during a condolence gathering and burial ceremony for a deceased migrant in Ethiopia who had previously returned from South Africa, the majority of the conversation revolved around the returned migrant's wellbeing and luxurious life instead of focusing on the solemn occasion of the imminent burial. The returnee had achieved significant milestones, such as building a good house, buying a car and establishing a business. His success inspired his two brothers to migrate to South Africa as well.

This illustrates how migration success stories may capture individuals' attention and aspirations, overshadowing other significant considerations. Even in the midst of witnessing the grieving process and the loss of a family member (killed in a robbery), two young people who attended the ceremony felt undeterred by the potential risks and decided to migrate to South Africa just a day after the burial. Their determination to pursue migration despite what they had observed demonstrates the powerful influence of success stories and the allure of a better life.

Migrants' understanding of the Journey, opportunities and risks

While having extensive knowledge about migration, migrants have learned valuable lessons about its complexities, the challenges involved in the journey, the risks they face and the potential opportunities available through various means.

¹⁸ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 27.

¹⁹ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 13.

Despite the tedious process and waiting time involved, regular migration is not life-threatening and does not entail exhausting road trips, thirst, hunger, the threat of kidnapping for ransom, or sexual assault. The legality of their journey provides greater protection for regular migrants than if they were to move by irregular means. Their whereabouts and employment are known to their families and government officials. In legal terms, regular migrants can assert their rights against their host country and the agencies facilitating their migration. They are usually able to work in a safer environment and are more likely to receive fair compensation for their efforts. In contrast, irregular migrants (sometimes, but not always) may earn more, but they are susceptible to being denied their wages and are at risk of being apprehended by the authorities for their illegal presence. They also lack legal recourse if they are subjected to exploitation by their employers.

The involvement of intermediaries and the payment of fees by host employers and the government creates an unhealthy relationship between migrant employees and their hosts. The hosts often acts as if they have purchased the migrant, while the migrant complains of overwork and abuse. This impasse leads to disagreements and resentment, often resulting in the migrant's escape from the host. Such actions transform the legal migrant's status into illegality, putting their stay at risk, leaving them unpaid, undocumented and susceptible to imprisonment. These occurrences are well known and prevalent among migrants. Both regular and irregular migrants are aware to a certain extent that many migrants in Gulf countries have been subjected to appalling treatment.

Most interviewed migrants who have returned home to Ethiopia have come to understand the grave dangers associated with migration. While a complete lack of awareness is rare among would-be migrants, partial knowledge about the risks remains widespread. Some interviewees mentioned that discussions about migration take place in public spaces, bars and during khat sessions. However, these discussions often remain superficial, lacking a relevant understanding of the various stages and intricacies involved in the migration process.

While a minority of migrants interviewed said that they had been completely unaware of any potential danger they might encounter, those with full knowledge of the risks they are likely to face are also a small minority. Several testimonies illustrate the stark preparations that young women make before embarking on the journey. One interviewee packed a three-year reserve of contraception pills in her bag.²⁰

Drowning at sea is frequently cited as a danger, and 'attacks by bandits', hunger, thirst and long treks on foot are nearly all systematically referenced as risks. Most aspiring migrants do not have a realistic knowledge of the region's geography. The majority are aware that crossing Djibouti and Yemen is necessary to reach the Gulf, but many share their surprise upon realising the significant distance and time required to reach Saudi Arabia, as shown by numerous testimonies.

In some instances, unforeseen events arose even for migrants who had prior knowledge of the migration itinerary. These included the outbreak of the wars in Yemen and Sudan, and the construction of the Saudi border post of Rago, which is 'protected' by a robust border protection force, supported by a large network of surveillance cameras and, when necessary, use of weapons against migrants. In this regard, a Tigrayan returnee from Saudi Arabia said:

²⁰ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 06.

We arrived at Yemen–Saudi border after escaping the torture chamber in Yemen. The border is highly protected through modern surveillance equipment and armoured vehicles. I saw the border guards indiscriminately shell the migrants through [using] artillery. I travelled over dead bodies and fortunately crossed the border and eventually reached Saudi.²¹

Migration brokers

Facilitation of migration in Ethiopia involves both legal and illegal actors. Several agencies specialising in this area have established offices in Addis Ababa and other major cities in Ethiopia. These agencies are officially registered and licensed to operate. Their primary objective is to assist Ethiopian job seekers in finding employment opportunities in Gulf countries. They collaborate with corresponding agents located in each country.

Individuals interested in migrating and who meet the residency and work requirements often visit these agencies during their free time to explore job opportunities. In addition, the agencies employ local brokers and recruiters to actively search for and attract potential migrants from various regions across the country. Once a job is secured, the agents coordinate the necessary documentation, medical checks and visas to finalise the migration process and send the migrants to their host country sponsors.

It is important to note that, in most cases, legal migrants do not have to pay cash up front, except for their own medical checks, which are sometimes covered by the sponsoring host. These conditions are outlined in the *Federal Negarit Gazette* No 923/2016.

Irregular migration and human trafficking schemes in Ethiopia involve the participation of illegal and semi-legal actors. These actors include traffickers, employees of Gulf states' embassies, investors with business interests in Ethiopia, foreign migration facilitators entering Ethiopia on tourist visas and Ethiopians living abroad.

Traffickers play a key role in facilitating irregular migration and human trafficking. They exploit vulnerable individuals by offering false promises of better work and life opportunities abroad.²² Employees of Gulf states and Ethiopian embassies are unofficially involved in these schemes as well, as they actively search for migrants and assist in obtaining visas and transportation to their respective destination countries.²³

Foreign investors with business interests in Ethiopia sometimes misuse their legal privilege and status to take advantage of migrant employees, transporting them to their own countries for their own purposes. Similarly, expatriates and Ethiopians living abroad contribute to irregular migration by finding jobs for interested migrants and assisting in the process of taking them abroad.

All these forms of migration are irregular and clandestine, making the identification, tracing and recording of migrants difficult. This complex and elusive nature of irregular migration has indirectly contributed to its continuation and growth.

²¹ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 05.

²² Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 11 and 13.

²³ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 07 and 09.

Migration routes out of Ethiopia

Six principal migration routes were identified out of Ethiopia:

- from Dire Dawa/Dewele into Djibouti ,Yemen or Saudi Arabia;
- from Harar/Tog Wajaale into Somaliland, Yemen or Saudi Arabia;
- from Semera /Galafi into Djibouti ,Yemen or Saudi Arabia;
- from Addis Ababa, Hawassa, Yebelo and/ or Moyale into Kenya and South Africa;
- from Addis Ababa to the Gulf countries.

Additionally, from Wollo, Tigray and other regions, irregular migrants travel into the Afar region towards Djibouti and then on to Yemen. Figure 2 shows the routes between Ethiopia and the Gulf.

In terms of timing, interviewees said that Ramadan was considered a favourable period for irregular migration. There was a common belief among the migrants that, since Ramadan is a fasting month for the Muslim community, border guards would be fasting and praying during this month. As a result, border controls would become lax, making it easier to cross. A returnee from Jimma said:

The trafficker had told us at the beginning of our journey that Ramadan is the best month to travel to Saudi Arabia. The border guards fast and pray throughout Ramadan. Ramadan is a month in which the border guards believe that they are connected with their God. They therefore refrain from taking severe and indiscriminate measures.²⁴

²⁴ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 16.

These agencies are monitored by the government, which has the authority to revoke a licence in cases of violation, according to MoLS. MoFA is responsible for overseeing bilateral agreements signed between Ethiopia and partner governments. The ministry and its personnel stationed abroad provide assistance to migrant workers in resolving disputes, although migrants frequently express concerns about procedural inefficiencies and instances of corruption. One returned migrant said that he had to bribe an official of the Ethiopian embassy in Saudi Arabia to have his application expedited.²⁵ Nevertheless, the ministry does support migrants and facilitates the repatriation of those who wish to return.

Ideally, migrants using these travel agencies should benefit from, and the agencies should adhere to, norms and regulations. However, a significant number of agencies reportedly engage in fraudulent practices. Interviewees alleged that some agencies were participating in clandestine trafficking and that they often charge unsuspecting migrants money for services that are already covered by their sponsor, taking advantage of both parties.²⁶ The amount of money the sponsor pays to bring in the migrant is often nearly equivalent to two years of the migrant's salary, which may be unlawfully pocketed by these agencies. This creates an unhealthy and exploitative relationship between the sponsor and the migrant, leaving both parties victims of the system, while the PEAs cash the main benefits. Exacerbating the issue, when problems arise between the sponsor and the migrant, the agencies often cease their follow-up, leaving the migrant victimised and without support. PEAs may disappear and their owners and employees may no longer be found at short notice, escaping accountability through their personal and often political connections. A Jimma female returnee from Lebanon stated:

After I arrived in Saudi, the PEA disconnected from me and I faced several physical and psychological damages including denial of my wage for several months.²⁷

Becoming an irregular migrant is not limited to those who cross borders unlawfully. Legal migrants may lose their official status and permits if their employment with the sponsor ceases. One migrant interviewed stated that the host would inform the worker that the business was closing, and they would have 15 days to find another employer, after which the employer could unilaterally decide he was no longer responsible for a migrant he legally brought in.²⁸ In other situations, migrants' status becomes irregular when they have to escape from their sponsor as a result of abuse and mistreatment, often leaving their identification documents behind. Because of these risks, some interviewees said that they considered the illegal migrant status to be more advantageous, despite the need to hide from the authorities. They stated that they left the original host because the pay for irregular migrants was significantly better. Specifically, a woman returnee in Dessie stated:

I had left my employer and became an irregular migrant. I decided to become an irregular migrant for several reasons. It provided me freedom of movement and choice. Second, it increases my payment as I did not make payment to my *Iqama* sponsorship, which was withheld from my monthly salary.²⁹

Pay for undocumented migrants is often higher because the hiring party avoids covering the PEA fees and other related costs associated with legal migration from Ethiopia. Irregular migrants said that they felt they were better able to live in accordance with their own wishes, and work for whoever they chose. Interviewees indicated that agencies often failed to provide clear job

²⁵ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 07 and 09.

²⁶ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 23 and 27.

²⁷ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 13, p 11.

²⁸ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 27.

²⁹ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 21.

descriptions to the migrants and did not disclose this information to the host employers. Such a lack of transparency leads to strained work relationships when expectations are not met. These issues could be mitigated by ensuring clarity among all parties involved before entering into contractual agreements. However, the clandestine behaviour and fraudulent practices of the brokering agencies prevent such measures from being implemented.

Our research revealed that the majority of legal migrants interviewed reported that they had eventually become undocumented because of the unhealthy relationship between the host and the migrant. Like those who arrived through irregular means, those interviewees who had become undocumented agreed that the benefits of better pay and freedom of movement were considerable, despite the need to hide from law enforcement authorities.

Irregular migration networks inside Ethiopia

The methods employed to entice, recruit and transport migrants from Ethiopian human trafficking networks to other criminal networks abroad reveal their high level of organisation and cohesion, starting from the local level and up to the international level, and involving both foreign and domestic criminal networks. Local traffickers use various methods to recruit victims, such as spreading enticing rumours and contacting relatives and returnees. They also brand themselves by telling success stories of prior migrants they have sent abroad.

In many instances, once victims agree to migrate and pay for their journey, local traffickers transport them to their intended destination and confine them in secured locations, severely limiting their freedom of movement. To avoid detection, traffickers frequently transport victims using vehicles, occasionally enlisting the help of guides who possess previous migration experience and familiarity with the terrain.³⁰

However, near checkpoints and foreign borders, guides may instruct victims to travel on foot in order to evade detection. In the past, local traffickers would operate within the communities from which they recruited victims. They have now adopted a more detached approach, utilising phone networks and personal connections to identify and target new victims.³¹ This covert approach is employed to avoid detection by law enforcement agencies and to prevent negative reactions from the community. Two migrants travelling through Humera and Metema reported that they were required to make a mandatory payment to traffickers before crossing the border into Sudan.³²

This practice stems from the fact that Ethiopian traffickers take a percentage of the victims' payment, which suggests the lack of a significant financial connection between the Ethiopian traffickers and their Sudanese counterparts. In contrast to the eastern Ethiopian migration routes, where cross-border trafficking often involves financial collaboration, the trafficking occurring on this western route primarily focuses on the transportation and smuggling of victims, without any significant financial sharing between the different chains in the trafficking network.³³

Once migrants using the Humera and Metema routes cross the Sudanese border, they have to establish a new agreement with Sudanese traffickers if they wish to continue their journey to

³⁰ After the victim agrees to migrate and pay for the journey, traffickers transport them and hold them as leverage until they receive payment. It is rare for the recruiter to travel with the victim. However, in one identified case, the recruiter also travelled part way through mixed routes to Sudan and Dubai. More often, traffickers send the victims on their journey with a driver.

³¹ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 16 and 26.

³² Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 13 and 16.

³³ *Ibid.*

Khartoum. Cross-border trafficking on this route is limited to relaying victims. Migrants using this route pay around ETB15,000 (€375) before crossing into Sudan.³⁴

Irregular migration networks outside Ethiopia

Unlike the western migration route to Sudan, trafficking using the eastern route via Djibouti, Somaliland or Puntland, is transnational and well organised. The Ethiopian traffickers involved in this route display a high degree of coordination and organisation, maintaining strong connections with their counterparts operating in the aforementioned destinations. They appear to operate as an efficient system, seamlessly moving trafficked migrants across borders and facilitating their journey to the Gulf states.

After crossing the Ethiopian border, victims of this route are required to pay a fee when they arrive at specific locations such as Tadjoura or Obock in Djibouti, Berbera in Somaliland and Bossaso in Puntland. These payment points are located on the coasts of Djibouti, Somaliland or Puntland and indicate the level of organisation and control exerted by the traffickers operating on this route. Once migrants reach ports in Djibouti, Somaliland or Puntland, they are asked to pay between 7,000³⁵ (€175) and ETB22,000 (€550), excluding their food and other personal items.³⁶

These payments are taken from the migrants just before they board the boat. The payments include the cost of the boat up to arrival on Yemeni shores. Usually, victims do not carry their money with them but leave it in the custody of a trusted person, as a form of services guarantee, to be paid after arrival at a destination agreed earlier, and they telephone to confirm their arrival so that the remaining payment can be made. This point is representative of nearly all irregular migrants.

Boats used to transport migrants are often small, narrow and dangerously overloaded, putting the lives of the passengers at risk. Depending on the sea conditions, boat operators may instruct the migrants to throw their belongings overboard, resulting in the loss of important identification documents, and causing some people to fall into the sea and drown. Once they reach Yemen, migrants are usually forced to jump off the boat into the sea, and some drown because they can't swim.

Upon arrival on the beach, migrants are received by notorious armed traffickers, such as 'Abdul-Qawi', who subject them to brutal treatment and exploitation. Only a few are able to escape the custody of these traffickers, while others fall into the hands of other traffickers, further perpetuating the cycle of abuse and exploitation. Following their capture, migrants are transported to pre-arranged custody shelters, where they are fed and allowed to take a shower. Traffickers then order each captured person to call their relatives and inform them that a ransom is to be paid, or else they will face brutal consequences. Brutality includes torture, beatings, rapes and killings in front of other migrants. When migrants are unable to pay, they are usually punished but kept alive to be sold on to other criminal networks and used as forced labour over extended periods of time. This 'bonded-labour' is employed in khat farming, date harvesting, goat herding, domestic services, and water and wood collecting. Those who are willing to pay – and have relatives who can afford a ransom – may be released. A returnee explained what he had faced as follows:

When we arrived in Yemen, notorious Yemeni traffickers known as Abdul-Qawi were waiting for us with their vehicles and armed guards. When the migrants were taken off the boat, beaten and loaded into their vehicles, I escaped by diving back into the sea.

³⁴ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 13.

³⁵ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 10.

³⁶ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 13.

One person who went with me from Jimma followed me. Later, a man with a car came and we got into the car. Then he took us to his home. When we went home, we ate, drank water, and chewed Khat. In another room, Ethiopians are being beaten and bloodied for not being able to remit money to the trafficker. Many of our neighbours have died at the hand of traffickers.³⁷

Traffickers do not take money in advance until the migrants place their lives in their hands. Both know that, if migrants are transported to Yemen and money is not paid, the consequences could be lethal. If migrants possess sufficient financial resources, their passage will be eased. If migrants do not have financial means, then the traffickers propose a business 'solution' through forced labour options, but always on terms to the migrants' further disadvantage. Destitute migrant candidates in Ethiopia are lured to sign up to migrate to Saudi Arabia or Sudan. They are unaware that the traffickers' objective from the start is to provide them with a forced labour option, usually agricultural, in Yemen or Sudan.³⁸ Trapped in these dire circumstances, certain migrants find themselves compelled to collaborate with traffickers, assuming the role of intermediaries between the traffickers and fellow migrants. These collaborating migrants reinforce the traffickers' control and prioritise their interests, often at the expense of the wellbeing and rights of the migrants themselves.

When the migrants' relatives in Ethiopia agree to pay, human traffickers from Yemen provide them with bank account details in Ethiopia. Traffickers also have alternative bank accounts in Saudi Arabia or Yemen to receive ransom payments, confirming the transnational nature of their businesses. Payment values for a release in Yemen vary between SAR3,000 and SAR4,000 (€1,050 to €1,400).³⁹ Our research identified one migrant who had paid ETB50,000 (€1,250) inside Ethiopia for the Yemeni traffickers to release him.⁴⁰

Free passage along the Yemen migration route is almost impossible. All the payments include transportation to the Yemeni–Saudi border post of Rago. Once a migrant makes the payment, Yemeni smugglers transport the person close to Rago. Transit through Rago and into Saudi Arabia is done on foot. Once migrants pass Rago and cross the border into Saudi Arabia, they must then pay Saudi guides to take them to Riyadh and Jeddah. If migrants do not have the cash to pay, they are allowed to work in domestic or agricultural jobs in the nearby area for about two months in order to earn SAR2,000–2,400 (€700–€825).⁴¹ Furthermore, movements between the Yemeni smugglers' custody shelters are seasonal. At times, migrants must wait for up to three months to receive official permission to travel into Saudi Arabia.

Crossing from Rago into Saudi Arabia without authorisation has become almost impossible as the border area is guarded with cameras. Saudi border guards also use weapons and open fire on migrants. A Jimma man returning from Saudi Arabia attested that "I had seen several dead persons and unburied corpses resulting from gunfire".⁴²

In interviews, Yemen was consistently referred to as the most dangerous place migrants transited on their journeys. Crossing the Rago border post has become increasingly difficult, to the point where the chances of success are now extremely limited. During Ramadan in 2022, there was a notable increase in migrant attempts to cross the border.⁴³ Migrants assumed that border guards might be

³⁷ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 10.

³⁸ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 10 and 12.

³⁹ SAR is the abbreviation for Saudi Riyals.

⁴⁰ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 05.

⁴¹ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 05 and 10.

⁴² Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 05, 06, 08 and 10.

⁴³ IOM (2023b).

less vigilant while fasting during daylight hours. However, most of these attempts did not succeed and many migrants were forced to return to Yemen. News of these failed attempts spread widely on social media, contributing to a general sense of uncertainty among potential migrants.

On the western migration route via Sudan, smugglers typically demand payment from migrants in exchange for transportation and guidance to Khartoum. Unlike the smugglers on the eastern route, Sudanese traffickers often accept payment in the form of labour rather than cash and are generally less brutal in their treatment of migrants. However, the journey itself is harsh and dangerous. Interviewees reported that many migrants had suffered snake bites that proved fatal. Despite these risks, many migrants continue to use this route as a means of escape, often in the hopes of finding better economic opportunities in Sudan or beyond.

One migrant who was interviewed reported that they had worked for five months in a domestic household and earned a total of SDG25,000 (€75).⁴⁴ Their whole salary was diverted by the migration broker. Another migrant worked at harvesting inside Sudan near the Ethiopian border. After collecting SDG20,000 (€50), he had to pay SDG10,000 to the person who smuggled him to Khartoum.

Many Ethiopian migrants who choose the western route via Sudan go with the intention of heading to Europe through Libya. However, once a migrant reaches Libya the traffickers' mindset, exploitation and abuse systems are like those in Yemen.⁴⁵ A woman from Jimma who had returned from Libya after payment of a ransom narrated her story:

I also continued my journey to Libya. The traffickers who recruited and transported me to Sudan arranged my trip to Libya intending to reach Europe. It took us around 10 days of walking on foot, and by boat. The traffickers are Arabic speakers and there are also Ethiopians. Libyan border guards arrested me at the Sudan–Libya border. They arrested me for nine months. The prison guards were very brutal persons who threatened, beat and raped me. In the prison, there was not adequate food and water.⁴⁶

7.2 Conditions and status of migrants in destination countries before repatriation

Conditions for migrants

Not every destination and experience yields negative outcomes for migrants. In the past, many Middle Eastern employers used to provide health care treatment.⁴⁷ The employers often gave migrant workers not only a bonus but also many gifts that could be shipped to Ethiopia.⁴⁸ Consequently, some migrants changed their lives and the lives of their family for the better.⁴⁹

Several success stories feature returning migrants who have purchased land and built houses for themselves and their families, ensuring their children have access to education. During their time abroad, the migrants have also diligently sent their hard-earned money back home. However, while

⁴⁴ SDG = Sudanese pounds.

⁴⁵ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp 9, 11.

⁴⁷ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

⁴⁹ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 02, 10, 15, 18, 23, 24, 25.

it is true that a few individuals in the Middle East have achieved remarkable wealth, these stories alone do not fully capture the positive aspects of migration.

Some returnees explained that at their destination countries there were exceptionally good people who treated them well.⁵⁰ Some hosts provided medical coverage for migrants at their own expense,⁵¹ provided unsolicited rewards for workers' good service,⁵² some paid salary on time and even covered transportation costs for migrants to return home.⁵³ These good practices established long-lasting ties between the respective migrant and host families.

The legal system, particularly the *Kafala* system prevalent in the Gulf,⁵⁴ presents significant challenges for migrants and fails to adequately protect their rights. This complex system makes it difficult for migrants, both legal and undocumented, to navigate and utilise it in defence of their rights.

However, in recent times, the situation has drastically changed. Many employers now take advantage of migrants. Many demand fee discounts from brokers, force migrants to work extra hours without pay, threaten to report them to the authorities for minor infractions and engage in other forms of exploitation.

The prevailing perception of Ethiopian migrants among Gulf state authorities and the public is often that they are 'illegals'. This framing results in greater vulnerability to abrupt crackdowns, sudden search and unfairly deeming them cheap labourers deserving of abuse or insult. Many are beaten,⁵⁵ not paid for their labour,⁵⁶ raped,⁵⁷ or arrested,⁵⁸ and their official documents are confiscated.⁵⁹ This treatment leaves many people traumatised and afraid to seek help.

Interviewees stated that legal migrants experienced abuse because of the trafficking networks' middle-men. These intermediaries would always take the side of the host and a large share of income at the expense of the migrant's salary.

Hosts in Gulf countries often provide a rationale for holding onto the documents of arriving migrants, as they bear the costs of travel and fees charged by middle-men or agencies to facilitate their employment. This practice is seen as a means of safeguarding their investment. However, when migrants decide to leave in pursuit of alternative job opportunities, pre-arranged work, or because of a fear of abuse, it results in hosts losing their investment. As a result, there is a divergence between the interests of the employer and their employee which – objectively – national migration agencies could resolve.

⁵⁰ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 21, 23, 25, 27.

⁵¹ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 02, 23 and 24.

⁵² Ethiopian Migration Study interview 25.

⁵³ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 18, 25, 28.

⁵⁴ The *Kafala* system in the Gulf states requires migrant workers to have an in-country sponsor, typically their employer, which creates a power imbalance and makes workers vulnerable. Employers can confiscate passports, limit mobility and abuse workers without facing legal repercussions. Activists are lobbying for reforms to address these concerns, and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon have expressed their intention to reform the system.

⁵⁵ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 06, 11, 12.

⁵⁶ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 01, 11, 12, 14, 22.

⁵⁷ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 06, 11 and 13.

⁵⁸ All forcefully returned migrants were arrested.

⁵⁹ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 11, 12, 15, 18, 21, 23, 24, 28.

There are also situations where the expectations of both the host employer and the migrant employee are not fulfilled. This occurs when the employer expects specific skills corresponding to a certain pay level, while the employee anticipates a lighter workload and better food than the one actually provided.

Many migrants present in the Middle East lack the necessary job-related skills. Conversely, Middle Eastern employers often have unrealistic expectations about migrants' qualifications. These discrepancies may provoke conflict between employers and employees. Employers become dissatisfied with employees who lack the requisite skills but cannot immediately dismiss them because of their financial commitment as a host. On the other hand, employees complain about excessive workloads and demanding schedules. Some hosts even make migrants work round-the-clock shifts, assigning them tasks such as cleaning multi-floor buildings and cooking for numerous families.⁶⁰

In some cases, employers may even take migrant workers to their relatives' homes to perform additional work. This further validates the complaints raised by the migrant employees. Some employers may deliberately exploit migrant workers as they perhaps feel deceived about the latter's skills and decide to recoup their expenses by increasing their workloads. Moreover, it remains uncertain what false promises or misrepresentations the middle-men or agencies might have made to the employer in order to promote their own business.⁶¹

Some migrants exploit fellow migrants by collaborating with their hosts, establishing relationships with the police and engaging in illegal activities. These migrants facilitate the illegal entry of migrants for work, rent out parts of their own homes to undocumented migrants and charge exorbitant prices for accommodation. They may also involve themselves in illicit businesses, including alcohol production, drug trafficking and human trafficking of their compatriots.⁶²

Additionally, some women migrants participate in the prostitution industry. Surprisingly, many migrants who return to Ethiopia with wealth and improved social status have been involved in these illicit ventures.⁶³ Female Ethiopian migrants in the Middle East face various challenges, including involvement in prostitution and vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). As a result of a lack of awareness of their rights and feelings of shame and helplessness, some women do not feel able to resist forced sexual encounters. Consequently, migrant women are perceived as more exploitable compared with women from the Gulf. This leads to unwarranted attention and accusations of engaging in sex work. Even if women migrants are not involved in prostitution and do not become victims of SGBV, their financial dependence and need for protection may create tensions with women from host families and communities who are wary of their husbands' and male relatives' potential interactions with them. This may also result in the mistreatment of Ethiopian migrant women who are wrongly stigmatised as prostitutes.

Migrants' illegal status, detention and deportation

Ultimately, many Ethiopians in the Gulf region inevitably find themselves with some form of irregular status. This may occur through unauthorised border crossings, escaping from their host's custody to avoid abuse and mistreatment, overstaying their permitted working period or intentionally

⁶⁰ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 12.

⁶¹ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 12 and 21.

⁶² Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 09, 18, 22.

⁶³ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 09, 10, 21.

disregarding regulations in pursuit of better job opportunities and higher pay. Finally, newborn children of irregular migrants inherit their parents' irregular status.

Half the returnee migrants interviewed for this study were repatriated involuntarily. All were jailed in the Gulf after being caught by the authorities for being undocumented, or they ran away from their employers because of fear of abuse and harassment. Some were set up by their hosts for alleged wrongdoings after a disagreement or other factors. A returnee attested:

My main job was to take care of an old woman. I had a bad relationship with my employer, specifically with her son and his wife. Her son (the employer) received me from the airport, confiscated my passport and other documents, and frequently insulted and beat me. He denied me my six months' salary and attempted to rape me and he renounced his idea when he saw my period. This further deteriorated our relationship. His wife also insulted me, beat me, denied me food and exceedingly overburdened me. The house had a CCTV camera and I was overwhelmingly under their control. For these reasons, after consulting my Ethiopian friend, I decided to leave. When I entered a taxi, he followed and grabbed me. He took me back home, beat me severely and finally handed me over to the police, accusing me of trying to steal his property.⁶⁴

Regardless of the reason for their forced return to Ethiopia, it is a difficult and traumatic experience for these migrants, who often face additional challenges such as stigma, lack of support and difficulty reintegrating into their home communities.

Between the 1980s and the 2000s, the conditions in Middle Eastern prisons deteriorated significantly, making their use an increasingly viable option for the authorities when organising migrant deportations. During the 1980s, when the numbers of migrants in the Middle East and cases requiring detention were much lower, prison conditions and prisoner treatment were reported as decent. However, as prison conditions worsened, the option of paying bribes to be released from prison became imperative for migrants. This has led to the emergence of a new phenomenon, where Ethiopian Embassy employees and the police in the destination country handle the business of releasing prisoners for a fee. A returnee in Addis Ababa said:

I paid 3,000 Saudi Riyals (€735) for my release. This is a kickback paid to be released from prison and be deported to Ethiopia.⁶⁵

Those who cannot pay have no option but to endure prison conditions. Ultimately, these harsh conditions also serve as a deterrent, preventing migrants from ever returning.

Nevertheless, detention at a national prison facility is still considered preferable to being caught at the border in Yemen and then being returned. Migrants returning from detention on the Yemeni–Saudi border face the possibility of being kidnapped, raped and even having to pay to follow the same outbound route they originally took, but in the opposite direction.

When unique and unfavourable situations arise in the Gulf – such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the diplomatic struggle for regional influence between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Qatar and high-level security issues, migrants are often blamed, leading to crackdowns and mass arrests.

⁶⁴ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 11, p 11.

⁶⁵ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 7, p 11.

The Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the health, economy and migration dynamics of the Gulf region. Migrants in the Gulf countries faced significant challenges, including job scarcity, which resulted in their detention and subsequent deportation. As a result, migrants endured prolonged periods of overcrowded detention, increasing the risk of Covid-19 transmission. Additionally, the contraction of Gulf economies led to a surge in deportations as contracts were terminated.⁶⁶

Following the easing of Covid restrictions, migration flows to and from the Middle East began to increase again. However, there was also a significant rise in deportations of detained migrants from Saudi Arabia.⁶⁷ During the pandemic migrants and returnees faced immense hardships thanks to a lack of swift action from both the Ethiopian government and Saudi Arabia. Ethiopia faced financial constraints in receiving and transporting detained migrants from Saudi Arabia, while the latter escalated its detention of Ethiopian migrants and pressured Ethiopia to take them back. This impasse left many migrants in a state of uncertainty, enduring prolonged detention and deportation.

During Ethiopia's construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile River, Egypt – which opposed the dam – exerted its influence over the Gulf region, particularly Saudi Arabia, resulting in a major crackdown on Ethiopian migrants. Egypt believed that Ethiopian migrants in Saudi Arabia were providing support for the construction of the dam through bonds, donations and remittances.⁶⁸ Consequently, Egypt and its allies viewed the arrests and deportations of Ethiopians as a way of obstructing the dam project by disrupting remittances and creating a crisis in Ethiopia. This situation worsened during and after the 2017 GCC–Qatar crisis, when Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain aligned against Qatar. Egypt used this opportunity to pressure Ethiopia, leading to the imprisonment of Ethiopian migrants in Egypt's allied countries and the suspension of migrant flows to these, particularly to Saudi Arabia. Even legal migrants with approved residency and work permits were arrested during this crackdown.

Prison conditions in the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, were dire, prompting inmates to desire rapid deportation. In prison, local authorities and Ethiopian mission officers visited and registered prisoners, assigning them a queue number for deportation. Inmates were transported handcuffed from the prison centres to the airport in prison vans. The Ethiopian embassy issued *laissez-passer* documents to facilitate their legal entry into Ethiopia upon deportation. Deportations were generally based on a first-come-first-served system, although priority was given to those who had bribed officials, pregnant women, the elderly, mothers with children and medical patients.

Migration has become a cyclical pattern for both the Gulf states and Ethiopia, and so has deportation. Ethiopians migrate to the Gulf en masse, only to be deported in large numbers. Between 2017 and 2022, IOM reported that over half a million Ethiopian migrants were deported from Saudi Arabia alone.⁶⁹ This has created a significant financial burden for both countries, which may explain the deteriorating treatment of migrants by the latter's law enforcement authorities. Changes in behaviour became evident through harsh prison environments, and even the use of artillery at border crossings as a deterrent against the migrant influx.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 25 and 27.

⁶⁷ In order to contain the spread of Covid, many migrants were arrested and then deported.

⁶⁸ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 9.

⁶⁹ IOM (2023). *Return of Ethiopian Migrants from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Annual Overview 2022*.

[available at

https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1701/files/documents/IOM_RDH_KSA_Annual_Overview_2022.pdf. Accessed: 1/3/2025]

⁷⁰ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 03, 04, 05, 10, 16.

7.3 Return to Ethiopia

Motivations and resources of voluntarily returning migrants

Voluntary migrant returnees return home for various reasons. Some reported that they missed their family,⁷¹ some said that they felt that they had earned enough,⁷² others had come to the realisation that their lives and income were not likely to improve if they continued to work abroad, or that migration had not met their expectations in terms of producing wealth. Two interviewees said that they had decided to return voluntarily as a result of illness caused by work overload.⁷³

In some cases, voluntary returnees may deceive their hosts by telling them they are only going back home temporarily and promise to return.⁷⁴ Voluntary returnees may lie out of fear of being denied permission to leave if they reveal that they are going back for good. Hosts may even pay for their ticket, hoping they will return to work for them. However, trust can erode over time, leading to undesired outcomes for future migrants. A woman returnee from Saudi Arabia in Addis Ababa stated:

My employer has sponsored my roundtrip hoping I will return to Saudi Arabia. However, I used this opportunity to sponsor my travel to my country and then I did not return to Saudi Arabia.⁷⁵

Forced returnees return as they had no other choices, having been arrested and deported without their consent.

Current legal and policy position of Gulf states, Djibouti and Ethiopia on forced repatriation

The Gulf states have recently made efforts to improve their handling of migrants by implementing labour-related laws, establishing bilateral labour agreements and setting minimum wages. However, these developments have come after sustained criticism from human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch, as well as from media and other activists. When Gulf countries have protective laws in place for migrants, enforcement is often lacking, leading to frequent violations of migrants' rights and the need for them to protect themselves proactively.

In addition to the Gulf countries, Ethiopian migrants are also being deported from Yemen, Djibouti, Libya and Sudan. Deportation from Yemen and Libya is complicated by the presence and proliferation of armed non-state actors, making the implementation of deportation laws challenging. Migrants trapped in territories controlled by these actors are often required to pay ransoms for their release and return. On the other hand, deportation from Djibouti and Sudan is usually at the discretion of the migrants, unless they are convicted of serious crimes.

According to our Interviewees, migrants travelling through the Horn of Africa tend to receive better treatment compared with what they experience in Yemen and Libya. This is partly the result of an agreement that is currently being developed between Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) member states on the free movement of people within the region, the IGAD Protocol on Free

⁷¹ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 18.

⁷² Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 02 and 15.

⁷³ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 23 and 28.

⁷⁴ Ethiopian Migration Study interviews 02, 15, 18.

⁷⁵ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 02.

Movement of Persons in the IGAD Region,⁷⁶ as well as the IGAD Protocol on Transhumance.⁷⁷ Additionally, there are initiatives among the Horn of Africa countries to combat cross-border criminal activities, including joint law enforcement operations. The region also benefits from multilateral migration agreements such as the IGAD Regional Migration Policy Framework and the IGAD Regional Guidelines on Rights Based Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs), which have created a social norm of treating migrants respectfully in each other's countries. Furthermore, shared ethnic ties across the IGAD nations foster a sense of solidarity and help to uncover criminal activities.

Despite endeavours to endorse a migration policy, Ethiopia currently lacks a comprehensive policy framework for migration and repatriation. However, the government has taken some steps to address irregular migration and human trafficking. It has ratified the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and its supplementary protocols related to the smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons. The country has also signed IGAD conventions on mutual legal assistance and extradition. Domestically, Ethiopia has enacted laws governing overseas employment and combating human trafficking and people smuggling. Nevertheless, there is a need for migration specialists within relevant ministries, agencies, law enforcement bodies and within the judicial system to effectively address the needs and concerns of migrating citizens. There is currently no lead agency responsible for addressing migration issues and providing comprehensive support to returning migrants, and the efforts made so far lack coordination and cohesion.

Ministerial offices, such as MoWSA and MoLSA, have been established to prevent human trafficking and facilitate overseas employment opportunities. Awareness campaigns have been conducted, and law enforcement actions have been taken against traffickers, resulting in arrests, prosecutions and convictions. Consequently, many women migrants now choose regular migration channels thanks to increased awareness about how to access such routes.

However, traffickers have adapted their methods and continue to operate covertly, leading to a persistent rise in irregular migration.

Knowledge of rights among deportee migrants

The majority of Ethiopian migrants in the Gulf region are from less educated backgrounds and often come from rural villages. They may not be fully aware of their rights or of the laws that are meant to protect them. Even if they have some knowledge, they may feel powerless to assert their rights or seek assistance because of the high costs and risks involved.

Similar to those in the Gulf states, returnees in Ethiopia who were interviewed for this study had limited awareness of their rights. Many did not recognise their mistreatment and exploitation as a crime, attributing it to their fate predetermined by God. Instead of holding others accountable for wrongdoing, they said that they felt ashamed of their circumstances. Even those who were aware of being victimised by traffickers hesitated to report to law enforcement agencies because of the fear of community stigma, re-victimisation and retaliation from the traffickers and their networks. In certain areas, traffickers had deep-rooted community connections and strong relationships with

⁷⁶ Protocol on Free Movement of Persons in The Igad Region.

[<https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1411/files/event/file/Final%20IGAD%20PROTOCOL%20ENDORSED%20BY%20IGAD%20Ambassadors%20and%20Ministers%20of%20Interior%20and%20Labour%20Khartoum%2026%20Feb%202020.pdf>. Accessed 1/3/2025]

⁷⁷ IGAD Protocol on Transhumance. [<https://icpald.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IGAD-PROTOCOL-ON-TRANSHUMANCE-Final-Endorsed-Version.pdf>. Accessed 1/3/2025]

local authorities and community leaders. As a result, it was and remains challenging for victims of human trafficking to bring these criminals to justice. Furthermore, even if victims were aware of their rights and desired to pursue legal action, the high cost and length of legal proceedings act as discouraging factors.

Trafficking networks contracted to return deported migrants

Trafficking and smuggling networks are not only responsible for facilitating the migration of individuals but also for their repatriation to their home countries. These criminal syndicates arrange the return of migrants from Yemen, Libya and Tanzania to Ethiopia. Migrants who have been unable to reach their intended destination countries often pay smugglers to assist them in returning to Ethiopia.⁷⁸

A couple of interviewees reported being unable to cross through the Yemen–Rago border into Saudi Arabia even though they had attempted to several times. These migrants, along with many others, contracted a smuggler’s boat to cross to Djibouti and paid for inland guides to get to Ethiopia. Another returnee from Libya also funded her return by paying a ransom to her traffickers.⁷⁹

Identifying members of transnational networks involved in human smuggling and trafficking is a challenging task. Even when they are identified, these individuals often remain untouchable thanks to their wealth, influence and power within their local communities. They are skilled at camouflaging their criminal activities under the guise of legal operations, making it difficult to hold them accountable. Operating across the region with a sense of impunity, they are viewed by some as helpers in facilitating the return of captive migrants abroad, which contributes to their ability to blend into the community.

While there have been instances where traffickers and smugglers have been arrested and taken to court, their powerful connections and resources often allow them to evade justice

Responses of the Ethiopian authorities to returning migrants

The lead interviewer held meetings with officials from MoFA, MoWSA and MoLS. The interviewer also contacted an official from NDRMC and observed two migrant reception centres (Wosen I and II). In addition, the interviewer contacted officials from the Refugees & Returnees Service (RRS), who told him that the primary focus of RRS’s former Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) was on refugees not on migrants. The RRS official also confirmed that migration in Ethiopia lacks a lead agent.

The process whereby the Ethiopian government repatriates and receives its citizens usually begins with bilateral discussions between Ethiopia and the host country. As an informant from the MoFA stated, in 2021 and 2022 the Ethiopian government sent delegates to Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Tanzania to evaluate the number and conditions of Ethiopian migrants in those countries.⁸⁰ He also noted that Ethiopian embassies or consular offices typically conducted these assessments. However, in countries where Ethiopian missions were absent, such as Yemen and Oman, a delegation composed of representatives from three government offices – MoFA, the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) and the Immigration and Citizenship Service – was dispatched to conduct the

⁷⁸ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 30.

⁷⁹ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 13.

⁸⁰ Ethiopian Migration Study interview with MoFA’s senior officer, April 2023.

assessments.⁸¹ MoFA verified citizenships, NISS provided security clearances and the Immigration and Citizenship Service issued *laissez-passer* travel documents for the repatriation process.

The government designated various government and nongovernmental organisations to be involved in the repatriation effort and clearly stated their mandates and roles. For example, during the March 2022 to 2023 repatriation project, the government planned to bring back 102,000 Ethiopians from Saudi Arabia and formed a National Committee consisting of representatives from 16 government offices to oversee the project.

MoFA chaired the Committee, which included the following organisations: Ministry of Health, Ministry of Justice, MoWSA, MoLS, the Transport and Logistics Ministry, NDRMC, the Ethiopian Federal Police, Ethiopian Customs Commission, Immigration and Citizenship Service, Ethiopian Diaspora Agency, RRS, NISS, Ethiopian Airlines and Airports Organisation, the Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI) and the Ethiopian Statistical Service.

Through these coordinated efforts, the Ethiopian government has been able to successfully repatriate thousands of its citizens from various countries. In the five years between 2017 and 2022, half a million Ethiopian migrants have been deported from Saudi Arabia.⁸² Specifically, between March 2022 and March 2023, the Ethiopian government repatriated 133,103 persons, of whom 131,000 were deported from Saudi Arabia.⁸³ At the beginning of 2024, the Saudi government was also working to deport more than 70,000 Ethiopian nationals from Saudi Arabia.⁸⁴

The MoFA collaboration with the Transport and Logistics Ministry, Immigration and Citizenship Service, NISS and Ethiopian Airlines and Airports Organisation brought the returnees to Ethiopia via Addis Ababa Bole International Airport or through inland borders. After their arrival, MoWSA, the Ministry of Health and EPHI began their tasks. MoWSA was tasked with reuniting returnees with their families. After the returnees arrived at the airport, the ministry welcomed them, registered them, identified the extent of any injuries, and worked with NGOs to provide immediate support.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² The Conversation (2022). 'Half a million Ethiopian migrants have been deported from Saudi Arabia in 5 years – what they go through' [available at <https://theconversation.com/half-a-million-ethiopian-migrants-have-been-deported-from-saudi-arabia-in-5-years-what-they-go-through-195378>]. Accessed: 1/3/2025]

⁸³ Mixed Migration Centre (2023). *Mind the Information Gap: Access to Information and Assistance of Ethiopian Returnees throughout their Migration Journey* [available at https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/280_EMP-Ethiopian-Returness-Report.pdf]. Accessed: 1/3/2025]

⁸⁴ Fana Broadcasting Corporate (2024). 'Repatriation of Ethiopians from Saudi Arabia to commence in two weeks' [available at <https://www.fanabc.com/english/repatriation-of-ethiopians-from-saudi-arabia-to-commence-in-two-weeks/>]. Accessed: 1/3/2025]

In collaboration with NGOs, MoWSA and NDRMC provide returnees with food and basic substances and transport them to temporary reception centres (shelters). As the expert from MoWSA said, in Addis Ababa there are nine reception centres. In these centres, MoWSA, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and other NGOs, provides health care (mental and physical), psychosocial support, cash and onward transportation assistance, family tracing and the reunification of unaccompanied migrant children, and life-saving support (food and water).⁸⁵ After providing immediate support at the reception centres, MoWSA provides returnees with 1000 birr and transports them to be reunited with their families. Returnees normally stay in the shelter for a short period of time (usually up to a full day). However, those originating from Tigray have reportedly stayed in shelters for eight to nine months because of the war there and were transported to Mekelle to reunite with their families following the signing of the Pretoria Peace agreement in November 2022 and the opening of inland transportation routes.

After the returnees reach their destination, MOLS, the Regional State Labour and Social Affairs offices and local authorities collaborating with NGOs are responsible for their reintegration.

Initial return

As discussed above, the Ethiopian government has established nine temporary accommodation shelters for arriving migrants, providing them with food and a small amount of money. However, as a result of limited capacity, some migrants (not from conflict zones) are compelled to leave the shelters soon after registration to make space for other new arrivals; they receive only very limited assistance.

Even with less assistance available, many returnees choose to stay in Addis Ababa, if possible, for several reasons. First, Addis Ababa serves as a central location for the establishment of reception centres, making it a natural gathering point for returnees. Second, if the returnees are seeking employment opportunities, it offers better prospects compared with other areas. Third, for those considering re-migration, the capital provides access to a wider range of resources, including comprehensive training programmes, medical facilities, migration agencies and more reliable information. However, it also has a higher concentration of illegal smugglers and traffickers. Lastly, returnees originating from conflict zones such as Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and Afar tend to remain in Addis Ababa until they make a decision about where to go or they permanently settle in the capital. This situation creates challenges for the repatriation and reintegration of returnees in Addis Ababa.

Those who originate from conflict zones in Tigray, Amhara and Afar are held in what have been called by some returnees 'prisons or concentration camps'. A Tigrayan man returned from Saudi Arabia remembered the situation as follows:

I did not pass any reintegration process. Instead, I was arrested four times in Ethiopia (three times in Addis Ababa and one in a remote area of South Ethiopia) [and placed] around Mizan Tipi in a concentration camp with other Tigrayans for being Tigrayan and connected with the war in Tigray.⁸⁶

Following the third phase of the civil war in Tigray, from July to December 2021, the government implemented a new handling system for Tigrayan returnees. They are first placed in shelters for a period of up to eight or nine months before being transported to Mekelle. There have been reports

⁸⁵ Ethiopian Migration Study interview with MoWSA's senior expert, April 2023.

⁸⁶ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 1, p 19.

of mistreatment and human rights violations against returnees from Tigray. Some reported that they were imprisoned, beaten and even used for propaganda purposes on television after their return.

Post-arrival reintegration support. Although Ethiopia has implemented a nationwide repatriation project for migrants, the country lacks comprehensive nationwide reintegration programmes. To alleviate the distress and hardship that migrants face on return, and in the absence of such a comprehensive programme, humanitarian organisations and donors have stepped in. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the IOM are actively involved in providing support and resources for deported returnees. However, the existing reintegration efforts led by government authorities and NGOs are fragmented and lack standardisation. These initiatives are sporadic and vary in their application across the country.

For example, although the government is responsible for receiving migrants at the airport and addressing their needs, there are instances where returnees are left to navigate their own way without any assistance. In contrast, other migrants are welcomed and provided with transportation or financial aid for reaching their destinations. They are offered sanitary and food assistance and are temporarily accommodated in reception centres in Addis Ababa. Psychological and physical treatment is also offered both at the airport and in these reception centres. However, the availability of such assistance and the lack of consistency with which it is applied undermines the reliability of support for the returning migrants.

Response of donors, national and international organisations. Several national and international organisations are involved in the repatriation, reception and reintegration of Ethiopian migrants. These organisations provide them with various forms of support, including transportation, basic necessities such as clothing and food, and temporary shelters. For example, IOM provides training for returnees on skill development, entrepreneurship, psychosocial issues and ‘Kaizen’;⁸⁷ assists returnees to develop business plans; and provides material in kind to support their businesses. A research participant from IOM specifically stated that “assistance has been provided to help returnees in opening small shops, cattle fattening, dairy and poultry farming, woodwork, and metalwork”.⁸⁸ Once IOM provides the support it is left to the zonal social labour and skills office to monitor the recipients. In SNNPR, the Catholic NGO CVM has provided training and up to ETB23,000 (€575) to female returnees, but it was closed because of a shortage of funds.⁸⁹

Given the huge number of cases, the assistance from the Ethiopian government and NGOs is only a small contribution to solving the returnees’ overall problems. Organisations such as Catholic CVM, the ICRC, the DRC and government agencies only provide financial assistance to enable migrants to transport themselves and sustain their livelihoods for a few months.

Official institutions and NGOs sometimes use a ‘marketing’ approach when reporting on their projects, which can create a misleading impression that challenges, particularly those related to irregular migration, have been fully addressed. In particular, IOM claims success in safely repatriating migrants from Yemen who were stranded for years,⁹⁰ yet does not follow up their situation over time. Overall, however, IOM is in a better position compared to other organisations in terms of its engagement in preventing illegal migration and ensuring the safe repatriation and reintegration of migrants.

⁸⁷ The term ‘Kaizen’ refers to a Japanese approach based on the idea that small, ongoing, positive changes contribute to significant improvements.

⁸⁸ Ethiopian Migration Study interview, IOM program officer, April 2023.

⁸⁹ Ethiopian Migration Study interview, Hadiya Zone Office of Social and Labour Affairs’ senior expert, March 2023.

⁹⁰ According to data provided by MoFA, covering 2020–21, 137,365 Ethiopians were repatriated from the Gulf countries, of which 2,133 were handled by IOM between Yemen and Ethiopia.

IOM operates a transit centre in Addis Ababa that assists returning migrants, and has established migration response centres in Dire Dawa, Dewele, Tog Wajaale, Moyale and Metema.⁹¹ It also sponsors Ethiopian government-led awareness campaigns. IOM registers migrants abroad, even in areas where the government is unable to conduct such operations, to help facilitate voluntary migration. It sponsors all expenses related to the return of migrants registered under its project of repatriation.

The ICRC, DRC and government agencies provide financial assistance to enable migrants to transport themselves and sustain their livelihoods for the first few months after their arrival. DRC provides relief items such as food and hygiene materials. It registers and sponsors the treatment of physically and mentally victimised returnees through the ERC. According to its Addis Ababa office, ERC has worked in family tracing and reconnection services for migrants who are unable to reunite with their families upon arrival, or during their stay in reception centres.⁹² ERC uses volunteers and telephones to conduct these operations.

National NGOs, such as Hope for Justice, Agar Ethiopia and the Beza Posterity Development Organisation operate returnee shelters in Addis Ababa and provide treatment, shelter, food and subsistence for returnees. However, because of the high number of returnees and the lack of funding, the assistance provided by these NGOs is limited in comparison to the needs.

EU migration projects in Ethiopia. The control of irregular migration is one of the sectors in which the European Union has been assisting Ethiopia for many years. The EU has designed, implemented and funded several migration projects in Ethiopia. These projects were designed to prevent irregular migration, protect victims of human trafficking and smuggling, and support the reintegration of returnees.

EU migration-related projects in Ethiopia have included the EU–IOM Joint Initiative programme on Migrant Protection and Reintegration in the Horn of Africa, Resilience Building and Creation of Economic Opportunities in Ethiopia (RESET II), Stemming Irregular Migration in Northern and Central Ethiopia (SINCE), Sustainable Reintegration Support to Ethiopian Returnees from Europe and Support to Vulnerable Displaced Populations affected by Covid-19, and the Better Migration Management (BMM) programme, among others. The EU engages in Ethiopia's migration issues either directly or through other international and local partner organisations.

The EU–IOM Joint Initiative Programme was a five-year programme launched in 2016 with the goal of enhancing migrant protection and reintegration in Africa. Ethiopia was one of the countries that benefited from it. Nearly 11,000 vulnerable Ethiopian migrants received assistance, enabling them to return home in a safe and dignified manner.⁹³ Over 10,200 people received some sort of reintegration assistance (economic, social or psychosocial). The project was completed in April 2022.

The EU Trust Fund's RESET II programme, which ran from May 2016 to May 2020, was implemented to address the underlying causes of displacement and irregular migration by fostering economic opportunities and boosting the resilience of the most vulnerable communities.⁹⁴ This programme benefited over 600 farmers and nearly 30 NGOs, including the UN Food and Agriculture Organization

⁹¹ Ethiopian Migration Study interview, IOM programme officer, April 2023.

⁹² Ethiopian Migration Study interview, ERC Addis Ababa office, April 2023.

⁹³ 'EU–IOM Joint Initiative concludes 5-years programme on migrant protection and reintegration in the Horn of Africa' [available at <https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/news/eu-iom-joint-initiative-concludes-5-years-programme-migrant-protection-and-reintegration-horn-africa>]. Accessed: 1/3/2025]

⁹⁴ See https://www.eas.europa.eu/node/47222_en. Accessed: 1/3/2025

(FAO) and Unicef, were involved in its implementation. There was also a RESET II Innovation Fund that ran from 17 June 2017 to 31 December 2022 and supported social entrepreneurs in bringing inventions to life that enhanced the resilience and livelihoods of 20,000 vulnerable people, with women constituting 50% of the beneficiaries.⁹⁵

SINCE, a programme implemented between 19 December 2015 and 31 March 2021, sought to contribute to reducing irregular migration from northern and central Ethiopia by improving the living conditions of those who were most at risk, including returnees.⁹⁶ It focused on vocational training and the creation of micro and small enterprises to broaden economic and employment opportunities, especially for young people and women. The project was implemented in the four regions of the country, Tigray, Amhara, SNNPR and Oromia.

The EU funded the three-year, €15 million Sustainable Reintegration Support to Ethiopians Returning from Europe (SRSERE) project between 28 April 2018 and 27 April 2023.⁹⁷ As well as aiding returnees from Europe, the aim of the project was to eventually contribute to the development of a national reintegration system for Ethiopia.

The BMM programme, a regional initiative in the Horn of Africa funded by the EU and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), aims to enable national authorities and institutions to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration, and effectively address and reduce trafficking in human beings and smuggling of migrants within and from the Horn of Africa region by applying a human rights-based approach.⁹⁸ Ethiopia is one of the countries that benefits from this project. Running from April 2016 to September 2025, the BMM programme intends to combat human trafficking by strengthening Ethiopian institutions and promoting the protection of and assistance for trafficking victims.⁹⁹ It pays special attention to the most vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied minors and women.

In a nutshell, since 2015, the EU has consistently assisted Ethiopia on migration-related issues through its Emergency Trust Fund for Africa project. EU programmes that have been implemented in the country are aimed at combating illegal migration and supporting Ethiopian citizens to change their lives through work at home. The EU has also assisted the Ethiopian government by funding anti-human trafficking campaigns and capacity-building training for law enforcement agencies.

Despite these initiatives, the level of support available to returnees does not meet their needs or expectations. More sustainable solutions are needed to address the challenges faced by migrants and improve their welfare. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are instances where government authorities ignore the concerns of migrants. Numerous interviews have revealed that local authorities have disregarded their grievances, refused to issue *kebele* identity cards, and have been unable to offer any form of assistance or support. Faced with these difficulties, a significant number of returnees therefore become disheartened and feel hopeless in their own country, leading them to consider options for re-migration. The assistance received by many returnees who have a

⁹⁵ See https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmes/resilience-building-and-creation-economic-opportunities-ethiopia-reset-ii_en. Accessed 1/3/2025.

⁹⁶ https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmes/stemming-irregular-migration-northern-central-ethiopia_en. Accessed 1/3/2025.

⁹⁷ https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmes/sustainable-reintegration-support-ethiopian-returnees-europe-and-support-vulnerable-displaced_en. Accessed 1/3/2025.

⁹⁸ See <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/projects/better-migration-management-bmm-programme>. Accessed 1/3/2025.

⁹⁹ https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmes/better-migration-management-programme-phase-ii_en. Accessed 1/3/2025.

desire to go back is often ultimately used to re-migrate. Thus, despite these supports, the majority of the returnees will have been involuntarily repatriated, leaving behind unresolved matters in their countries of deportation and having adopted an Arabic lifestyle. They have faced significant challenges reintegrating into their communities of origin. Conversely, their communities have reacted with prejudice and stereotypes, criticising the returnees for coming back empty-handed and with an unfamiliar culture.

Family and community reception of returning migrants. The role of family is paramount in the reception and reintegration of returnees. In some cases, family members have paid money to secure the release of their loved ones from prison. Upon their return, these migrants, arriving with few or no possessions, rely on their family of origin for daily necessities and a place to live. Those who have acquired wealth and significantly improved the lives of their families are often warmly welcomed, irrespective of the source of their wealth.

In other cases, some families have diligently saved the money sent to them by their migrant children and provide it to them upon their return, offering a financial support system to facilitate their reintegration.

Rejection by their families occurs when returnees cannot demonstrate they have fulfilled expectations and returned with funds. A majority of relatives and friends expect them to come back with large amounts of money. When that is not the case, many turn their back on returnees.

Returnees themselves may also view their home and family as backward, seeing their living conditions especially as 'low class'. When they return, returnees may state that what they did not like were some elements of the migration experience. Even when migration was associated with overwork, harassment, abuse and brutality, most interviewees still saw some positive elements in their experience.

Even those who have money and have been welcomed by their families may still face gossip and speculation about where their money came from, particularly if they are women: they may be accused of having engaged in prostitution or alcoholism, while men may be accused of having engaged in homosexuality or drug use. They may also be seen to be lacking in generosity.

The returnees may also face challenges adjusting to the changed environment in Ethiopia, as well as to any economic improvements made by those they left behind while they were away. They may feel detached from their own culture, family and customs as a result of their exposure to new ideas and ways of life while abroad.

Migrant returnees come back home with certain attitudes and social traits acquired abroad that are not valued by the home community, and these can affect family life. Returnees thus tend to create their own sub-community. As a result, the number of new marriages between returnees and members of their community of origin has reduced. For those who are married, the rate of divorce has increased.

Female migrant returnees suffer as they often find it harder to find a husband compared to returnee men. Some reported that when they found a husband, his motivation was to access their financial resources. Some men consider them too old to have children, or sometimes assume they are 'too difficult' as a result of some changes they see in their appearance and behaviour. Male returnees may also have made an independent or solo life choice and opt to divorce if they had a wife and

children before their migration. These men find their previous house and family inferior to the standards and ways of life they adopted abroad.

An example of these various trends is the high level of rejection of migrant returnees around Jimma. Some women have a hard time getting married as they are considered to have been in relationships while abroad. Others say the money they brought back is *haram* for many reasons.

All returnees face challenges adjusting to the changed environment in Ethiopia, as well as to any economic improvements made by those they left behind while they were away. They may feel detached from their own culture and customs as a result of their exposure to new ideas and new lifestyles while abroad. Family is one social network returnees may feel disconnected from.

Experience of migrants after their return to Ethiopia

Migrants who have returned to their home country share a diverse range of stories involving varying degrees of success. Some have experience partial success – those who had earned enough but not big enough to sustain them in their country of origin – while others face outright failure. Some migrants have managed to bring about moderate changes in their and their families' living conditions as a result of the money they have sent or been able to bring home. In some cases, they have utilised their hard-earned savings to establish small businesses able to sustain their future at a reasonable level. However, many returnees have stories marked by tragedy, and they struggle to find their place within the community after returning.

While migrants may boast about the positive changes they have experienced among their peers, they often hesitate to disclose their success during interviews or formal questioning. The tangible impact of their transformation can rather be observed in their daily lives and actions, encompassing buildings, purchasing heavy load trucks, educating their children in expensive and quality schools and engaging in profitable businesses. The challenges they face include rejection by family and friends, cultural challenges – adopting the new culture of their country of repatriation and facing difficulties reintegrating into the culture of their country of origin - the revelation on returning that the savings they have brought with them are insufficient (particularly if they had, for example, sold land to finance their original migration), the burden of high expectations from others, and the desire to repurchase land after selling it.

Reintegration challenges

The vast majority of Ethiopian migrants who return home from the Gulf countries and beyond do so because their hopes and expectations have been shattered. They left their homes seeking better employment opportunities and a brighter future, but often faced exploitation, abuse and discrimination abroad. Upon return, many find themselves in a precarious situation, with no job, no income and no social support. For those coming from conflict-affected areas the situation is even worse, as they may have lost their homes and belongings and have no place to go. Despite the existence of some reception centres and reintegration programmes, the support provided by the government and NGOs is often limited and inadequate.

Some returnees who have managed to save some money or acquired new skills abroad may have better prospects, but even they face significant challenges in reintegrating into their communities. Some may be stigmatised or marginalised because of their migration experience, while others may struggle to find a suitable job or start a business. Reintegration programmes that address the specific

needs and aspirations of returnees, including psychosocial support, vocational training and access to credit, can make a difference in their lives and help them rebuild their livelihoods.

When migrant returnees go back home, they are often left unsatisfied with the repatriation process. First, their expectations of life after return are hard to meet, as the government and NGOs only have limited resources to help the poorest and most excluded communities already in the country. Second, many returnees are repatriated by force and still have a desire to go back to the Gulf, so the assistance they receive is either minimal or used to help them return again.

Third, returning migrants often find it challenging to readjust socially and economically. For example, many persons from the South of Ethiopia, who had left for South Africa and sold their land for the trip, find, upon returning, that the money they earned is not enough to buy back their land. The rapid economic and social changes can be overwhelming, leaving little room for returnees to thrive, causing some to seek opportunities elsewhere. Increases in the cost of living, surging prices for land and housing, as well as general changes in the living standard of the country, create challenging conditions for returnees to pursue their livelihood in Ethiopia. In many cases, returnees have borrowed money or depleted their savings, but they still have an urge to migrate again. These returnees cannot fully understand the concept of opportunity cost and have become accustomed to the struggles they faced during their migration journey. Additionally, they have met people in the places they stayed who can help them evade the authorities en route and in their destination country. Some returnees even feel hopeless after their return and decide to risk their lives in the hope of finding a better future. A Tigrayan returned from Saudi Arabia explained:

After I arrived in Addis Ababa, the government took us to a reception centre located near Wosen, and provided us with lunch and ETB1000 [€18]. The government arranged a bus to take the returnees who came with me to their families. However, they told me that there is no bus transport to Tigray and informed me to leave the centre immediately. I told them to spend the night at the centre and they let me. In the morning, I left the centre and became homeless and hopeless.¹⁰⁰

Unfortunately, upon returning home, migrant returnees often face social stigmatisation. They are perceived by their communities as being louder, mentally ill and exposed to unconventional customs such as smoking shisha. Their observable behaviours align with the negative stereotypes that the community holds about them. In this regard, a female returnee from Jimma stated:

I went to my aunt's home but she did not welcome me and I did not want to stay with her. My aunt said to me that you came empty-handed while others were doing so many things.¹⁰¹

Migrants who remain in Addis Ababa to search for work and shelter contribute to the burden faced by the city's authorities. Migrants who choose to return to their original communities often receive a better reception and hospitality. This could be attributed to their smaller numbers and the familiarity they have with their local communities and authorities. The support available varies by region, and interviewees report that the assistance provided in locations such as Jimma, Hosaena and Dessie is better than that available in Addis Ababa. While certain local governments, like that in Dessie, offer a monthly allowance of ETB930,¹⁰² in Jimma, the local government takes a different approach by providing returning migrants in a dire state with a small plot of land and assistance in

¹⁰⁰ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 4, p 15.

¹⁰¹ Ethiopian Migration Study interview 14, p 19.

¹⁰² Ethiopian Migration Study interview 21, p 19.

constructing shelters, aiming to support their efforts to establish businesses.¹⁰³ Additionally, the local governments in Dessie, Jimma and Hosaena extend psychosocial support, vocational training and entrepreneurship programmes to aid the reintegration of migrants into society.

From the migrants' perspective, the decision to opt for Addis Ababa is based on the availability of opportunities and the ease of assimilation into a diverse culture, allowing them to live unnoticed if they have developed new cultural practices, addiction issues or feelings of shame brought on by failure. Those who return to their hometowns face scrutiny for any perceived shame and addiction issues, as well as for any changes in cultural practices potentially leading to rejection. However, if they have managed to save earnings or positively transform their own lives or those of their families, they may be seen in a more positive light.

Returnees' psychological difficulties

The reintegration process for Ethiopian migrants has varying outcomes: voluntarily returned migrants generally experience smoother reintegration compared to those who have been forcibly repatriated. Over time, voluntarily returned migrants have a positive economic status. Returnees who achieve positive economic outcomes often reintegrate well within their original communities, whereas, involuntary returnees have usually arrived empty-handed, making their reintegration challenging.

However, the task of reintegrating returnees who have returned as victims of challenging conditions, and also who have experienced different statuses abroad, is extremely challenging. Returnees carry emotional scars from their past experiences and uncertainty about their future. Many of them require psychological and mental treatment to deal with severe trauma, and they often lack motivation in general. Furthermore, some return with addiction issues, modified cultural habits, a change in living standards and with heightened demands for services. The feeling of shame if they have been unsuccessful, or of having wasted resources without realising any tangible return on their original investment and hardships, further adds to their emotional distress.

Desire to re-migrate: key challenges

Upon their return, many migrants, whether repatriated voluntarily or forcefully, express a desire to migrate to the Middle East again. Despite the hardships and abuse they experienced, they do not see their return as being viable in the long term. Some realise that what they earned was not enough, others find their savings have been drained by their families and some struggle to adapt to the environment and feel unwelcome. Some migrants claim they do not want to migrate again, yet they still have debts to pay and cannot secure a job in Ethiopia. Their response is often fuelled by anger over their long imprisonment and harsh treatment by their employers.

As previously mentioned, in many cases, returnees may have borrowed money or depleted their savings, but they still have an urge to migrate again. Not fully understanding the concept of opportunity costs, they may have become accustomed to the struggles they faced during their migration journey. Additionally, they may have met all sorts of people in the random places they stayed and, as a result, developed an ability to evade various authorities en route and in their destination country. Some returnees may even feel hopeless and decide to risk their lives in the hope of finding a better future.

¹⁰³ Ethiopian Migration Study interview, Jimma Zone Office of Social and Labour Affairs' senior expert, March 2023.

Another inducement to re-migration for returnees is used by traffickers via a system called *Mejan*.¹⁰⁴ When a candidate for migration brings three other candidates to the traffickers, the initial person has an opportunity to migrate without any payment from Ethiopia to the Rago border post between Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Conflict in different parties of Ethiopia, specifically the war in Tigray, has complicated the support and reintegration of migrants. Returnees from war-affected areas of Tigray, Amhara and Wollega were unable to get back to their families and some of them became homeless and resorted to re-migration.

8 Main findings

8.1. Cycle of migration and repatriation

1. Ethiopia faces a vicious cycle of migration and repatriation. A greater number of migrants leaves the country than is repatriated. Those who have returned with some savings find themselves short of funds as a result of the country's new economic situation, use the funds faster than expected and then migrate again. A significant number of interviewed returnees state they would like to return to the country they were repatriated from, despite challenging or negative experiences. It is unclear if it would be possible to deter irregular migration given this determination to re-migrate.
2. Ethiopia has a high population growth rate, there are not enough job opportunities and nearly 100,000 graduates leave universities and colleges annually. This has driven migration by uneducated people but also by those with a university level of education.
3. Despite the efforts of NGOs and the government to inform people about the risks of irregular migration, there is a strong awareness among the general public and migrants themselves about migration risks. This is manifested through the active engagement of the Ethiopian public in interpersonal exchanges, the extensive utilisation of social media platforms, the dissemination of information via government media outlets and even the portrayal of migration-related themes in video clips online.
4. Recognition of the considerable risks of irregular migration is often eclipsed by the strong desire of many citizens for a better life. Moreover, the presence of prior migrants in specific locations has the potential to entice migration candidates from the same origin to the same destination. Geographical location and religious affiliations also wield substantial influence in the selection of migration destinations.
5. The Ethiopian government actively supports migration for various reasons. Primarily, migration is perceived as a vital source of foreign currency, mainly through remittances, which the economy relies upon. The government has implemented a policy that welcomes the diaspora and their financial resources, offering investment incentives, such as free or

¹⁰⁴ '*Mejan*' is an Arabic term that refers to the practice of allowing an individual to travel (migrate) for free because of his/her involvement in recruiting others.

affordable land, tax exemptions, permission to open foreign bank accounts, duty-free imports and tax benefits. This approach fosters a perception among young people that diaspora status garners respect from both the government and society, thus fuelling the pace of migration. A striking example is the case of the 500,000 migrants planning to travel to Saudi Arabia in 2025. Ethiopia is taking measures to provide domestic-work skill training and educate Ethiopian migrants about their human and legal rights, should they choose to migrate to the Middle East again.

8.2. Regular vs irregular migration

1. Irregular migration prevails over regular migration. Male irregular migrants prevail over women. Compared to males, females tend to follow a regular migration route to avoid risks. There is a broad perception that regular migration is costly compared to irregular migration. However, irregular migration tends to be most expensive in monetary terms, demonstrating that the reverse is true.
2. Migration candidates in Ethiopia primarily rely on returnees and migration agents (both legal and illicit), as well as peer pressure and hearsay for information. Irregular migration is widespread and efficient in the country, with transnational criminal networks enticing and smuggling migrants between different groups. Illicit migration brokers have transformed the criminal business model by preying on vulnerable migrants who lack resources. Unlike previous approaches that profited from migrants' journeys to Gulf countries through fees, the emerging human-trafficking business model exploits the vulnerabilities of migrants. Some criminal groups deceive migrants, subjecting them to exploitative conditions and mistreatment during transit, forcing them into low-cost labour without any alternative means to pay the high costs demanded by these networks.
3. Expenses associated with regular migration, such as recruitment, transportation and visa fees, are typically borne by the employer in the destination countries. Ethiopia has allotted responsibilities for the protection of migrants' human, civil and labour rights in Middle Eastern countries to their existing diplomats but some personnel display neither ethical nor professional standards. As a result of the absence of safeguarding measures and personnel at the Ethiopian embassies, some employers in the Gulf exploit and mistreat migrant workers, keeping them in near-captivity and subjecting them to severe abuses. Migrants who experience mistreatment or seek better job opportunities have seized the chance to escape from their sponsors. This ability to break free from their designated employers fosters scepticism among both employers and employees. Consequently, many legal migrants are compelled to resort to illegal means as a result of these circumstances. This situation contributes significantly to the transformation of numerous legal migrants into illegal migrants. Most problems are caused not by actions on either side, but by misunderstandings or a divergence of expectation between them.

8.3. The migration process

1. The migration route for irregular migrants has developed a business model whereby migrants can engage in cheap labour to subsidise their income to pay their trafficking debts and subsistence. Everyone involved in running these migration routes is benefiting from turning the process into multiple business transactions. Farmers on these routes get cheap labourers. Households find cheap maids. Kidnappers enjoy ransom and some migrants feel better for finding work to subsidise their debt regardless of their abuse as cheap labour. The

fact that the irregular route is hostile makes it simple for the local community to benefit from the abuse of vulnerable persons.

2. During the migration process, migrants are abused in various forms. Irregular migrants are subjected to ransom, beaten, used as cheap or unpaid labour, and forced to walk long distances, suffering from thirst and hunger, as well as risking imprisonment, rape and death. Regular migrants have a chance of access to law enforcement and protection compared with irregular migrants, who live at the discretion of individuals. In both situations, migrants are abused.
3. Middle Eastern nations often have large families and the need for domestic workers is well established. Ethiopian female workers are needed for household work while men need to be skilled in order to be employed. The alternative to domestic work is to buy a residence permit (*iqama*); this requires an important financial investment and a sponsor. Another reason why women are more likely to follow a regular migration course is because Middle Eastern families sponsor them, while men tend to use irregular migration methods.

8.4. Repatriation of migrants

1. Ethiopian migrant returnees do not get adequate repatriation and reintegration assistance. Upon repatriation, victims of illegal traffickers do not report or complain to their diplomatic representations, nor do they attempt to take traffickers to court. Most victims do not know their rights after realising they have become a captive of the human trafficking networks. Police and law firms do not act on these matters, while perpetrators of abuse operate with near impunity.
2. Repatriates who have returned with some savings are better treated by their families and society compared with those who return empty handed, who face rejection. Repatriates sometimes return with foreign customs and habits that are not accepted by the community, leading to cultural rifts and antagonism. Moreover, home communities often live in extreme poverty. This motivates the government's apparent insufficient response to the needs of returnees. Providing greater assistance to repatriated migrants than to residents at home living in poverty conveys a perplexing message, and is widely regarded as ethically questionable, both from a social and a political standpoint.

8.5. Returnee reception process

1. Unlike in the past, the Ethiopian government has established a national committee (*ad hoc*) that consists of representatives from 16 government agencies to handle the repatriation process, a development which suggests a close attention to returning migrants. For example, between March 2022 and March 2023, 133,103 persons were repatriated.
2. The Ethiopian government has improved its reception process for returnees compared with past efforts. It has built nine reception centres and provided food and other goods and has also provided some transportation mechanisms and pocket money. It also provides healthcare to those in need. The government attempts to support and reintegrate migrants in their community by providing small business loans,¹⁰⁵ land, building materials for small

¹⁰⁵ This is a rare case because assets to be provided to microfinance institutions as guarantee for loans are often too high for returnees to afford. However, the opportunity exists and a limited number of returnees have benefited from it.

shops, and vocational training. The impact of these actions on the reintegration of migrants is, however, insignificant.

3. The government's migration database is considerably underdeveloped. It mainly relies on data from IOM. In order to prevent potential unrest among jobless youth, the government has implemented policies that prohibit rural-to-urban migration, specifically to Addis Ababa.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, the city's administrators have repeatedly suspended or restricted the issuance of national identity cards to limit internal migration.¹⁰⁷
4. Ethiopia is in the process of assigning specialists in labour affairs to its diplomatic representations in the countries to which Ethiopians most commonly migrate. These will be in charge of enacting Ethiopia's migration policy. The government has established a bilateral labour agreement with four Gulf countries, namely Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Jordan. Another four countries are in the process of signing the agreement: Lebanon, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain. Based on this agreement Ethiopia is now preparing 500,000 female domestic workers to deploy to Saudi Arabia.

¹⁰⁶ 'News analysis: South Wollo, Debre Berhan drivers, passengers ban entering Addis Ababa'. *Addis Standard*, 12 August 2022. <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-south-wollo-debrebirhan-drivers-passengers-ban-entering-addis-abeba/>. Accessed 1/3/2025.

¹⁰⁷ 'City Admin suspends renewal of residence ID'. *The Reporter*, 23 July 2022. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/25204/>. Accessed 1/3/2025.

9 Recommendations to all parties concerned with migration and repatriation

1. Efforts must be made to raise awareness about the prejudice human smuggling and trafficking causes to illegal migrants within their own communities and to provide support for victims of trafficking. Consultation and cooperation between Ethiopian local/regional authorities could substantially contribute to the dismantling of traffickers' networks and their prejudicial socioeconomic impact on society at large.
2. From an international perspective, it is essential to establish stronger law enforcement mechanisms to combat human trafficking and bring those involved to justice. Addressing this issue requires both better resources and greater political will.
3. Ethiopia's international partners, including the migration destination countries, should assist it in consolidating the Pretoria peace-settlement as well as assisting in the peaceful settlement of all conflicts across the country.
4. As this study has shown, migration and repatriation experiences are highly gendered. While the study was intended to be a rapid review of field data and literature, the significance of gender as a determining feature of the specific needs of migrants and returnees has become very clear. It is recommended that a more detailed gender analysis be undertaken to better understand these dynamics and their implications for programming.

9.1. Regular vs irregular migration

1. Existing anti-trafficking measures should be enforced, with new strategies in the fight against illegal migration developed at national and international levels. Ethiopia and its international partners should develop both preventative measures and mechanisms to support victims of trafficking adapted to their respective mandate and agenda.
2. Risk awareness campaigns focusing on the migrants' human, civil and labour rights can help educate communities and individuals about the dangers of illegal migration, trafficking and how to identify and report instances of abuse. Partnerships between Ethiopian and specialised agencies in the fight against human trafficking should ultimately bring those responsible to justice.

9.2. Migration process

1. Ethiopian special personnel at diplomatic representations could advise and supervise the establishment of contractual work agreements, job descriptions before migration and follow-up of the migrant employee on a regular basis at his or her location.
2. The Ethiopian authorities need to establish a legal framework to protect the rights of their migrating citizens and to work with other governments in the region to develop comprehensive policies and programmes that prioritise the protection and wellbeing of Ethiopian migrants.
3. Ethiopia should establish a special unit or delegation to follow migrants up and assist them in resolving problems with practical in-country solutions along with the host nation services.
4. Destination countries for migration should collaborate with the Ethiopian government to provide support and job opportunities, and participate in development efforts to address the human, civil and legal rights of hosted migrants.
5. It is crucial for the Ethiopian authorities to take stronger action to empower migrants and inform them of their rights and of the laws that protect them, regardless of their economic status or background.

9.3. Repatriation of migrants and returnee reception process

1. As the main 'owner' of its citizens' personal data, Ethiopia should augment, improve and maintain a consolidated database in order to assure close follow-up of its migrant citizens; provide accurate and timely migrant situation reports; and generate suggestions and measures for improving the protection of and conditions for migrants.
2. The need for customised support to victims, and reintegration programmes for returnees, especially those who have experienced conflict and displacement, should be addressed through the creation of local relay points in different Ethiopian regions affected by migration. These reintegration programmes require funding, coordination and monitoring through partnership between Ethiopian and EU authorities in order to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability, and ultimately to limit re-migration.

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