



Experiences and the welfare of Ethiopian irregular migrants on their transit to South Africa

Author: Shibru Mamo Kedida

Affiliation: Azusa Pacific University, California - USA

Correspondence: Shibru Mamo Kedida **Email:** shibrumm1963@gmail.com

Cite as: Shibru Mamo Kedida. (2023). Experiences and the welfare of Ethiopian irregular migrants on their transit to South Africa. *International Journal of Social and Development Concerns*, 17(Post COVID-19 Recovery and Sustainable development), 20–26. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8126621>

Chief Editor

Web:

www.ijfdc.org

Email:

info@ijfdc.org

Editing Oversight

Impericals

Consultants

International

Limited

Abstract: This study examined the experiences and welfare of Ethiopian irregular migrants on their transit to South Africa (their destination). The study used a desktop review technique to source for data related to this phenomenon. The author also interacted with some inmates in a Tanzanian prison who enriched these study findings. The study was guided by the cumulative causation theory. From the study, it was established that, irregular migrants face a lot of humiliating and inhuman experiences on their transit to their destination. The researcher suggests recommendations on their welfare improvement through different stakeholders including Ethiopian government, concerned countries and the International community.

Key words: *Irregular migrants, Experiences, Welfare*

1.1 Study background

According to the International Organization for Migration (2023), irregular migration is the movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination. Irregular migrant is someone who, owing to illegal entry or the expiry of his or her visa, lacks legal status in a transit or host country. The term applies to migrants who infringe a country's admission rules and any other person not authorized to remain in the host country also called clandestine/ illegal /undocumented migrant or migrant in an irregular situation. In the real sense though, the term "illegal migrant" is discriminative, stigmatizing and humanly degrading in nature. The European Commission clarifies that, illegal migration is a process and adopts irregular migrant to denote to the person (European Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 1509 of 2006).

Immigration numbers keep on changing every year depending on a number of factors. In 2018 the numbers were 258 million, while in 2010 there were 220 million immigrants and in the year 2000, the numbers were 173 million. Asian continent had the highest number of immigrants (approximately 80 million), followed by Europe (78 million immigrants). North America hosted 58 million while Africa hosted 25 million, Latin America and the Caribbean hosted 10 million and Ocean hosted 8 million (Donato & Massey, 2016; Mas-G, 2017). Schuck (2018) noted that in 2017, over 67% of the total immigrants were residing in more than twenty countries, whereas USA marked the first increase to have hosted 50 million immigrants. The welfare gains of the destination country is because migration increases supply of labour, which raises employment, production and thus GDP (Vershina, et al., 2018). Lefa (2017) asserts that, the international migration can boost aggregate income (GDP growth) in the high-income host countries over the long term. International immigration has a positive impact on foreign direct investment (FDI) and international trade as well (Watanabe, 2017). Documenting irregular migrants is however a great challenge. Most of them may not be registered in their countries of origin, destination or even on transit. Majority cannot be traced in their countries of destination due to their illegal migration status.

According to Enhancing Africa's Response to Transnational Organized Crime (ENACT) (2021), organized criminals are facilitating the illegal movement of people overland from Ethiopia to South Africa via Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique. Victims are sourced in Ethiopia by agents offering work opportunities in South Africa due to its position as the industrial powerhouse of the continent. The primary demographic picture of the victims are Ethiopian males aged between 18 and 30 years, which reflects the dominant age range of the working population (Author's Field data, 2023).

Migration in and out of Ethiopia is due to several factors, however lack of employment appears to be the main one. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' estimation, around two million Ethiopians live abroad. Over the last two decades, although Ethiopia has been one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, the employment rate remains low (Habib, 2020). International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2014) reported that, between November 2013 and March 2014, more than 163,018 Ethiopian migrants were repatriated. The collective determinants of a "successful" migration of the irregular migrants from Ethiopia to their destination in South Africa involves:- less logistic works, key individual traffickers strategically placed in diverse places within the migration routes, mobile money services and bank transfer facilities to facilitate the trafficking deals among others (Enact, 2021). Although there are no data to show exactly how many Ethiopians migrate to South Africa each year, tens of thousands of them have migrated there (IOM, 2009). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated in 2009 that 65,000 – 70,000 Ethiopians had migrated to the country (IOM, 2009)

Due to the fact that, Tanzania has enjoyed peace and stability for a long period of time, the country has in the past attracted many immigrants. The immigrants enter Tanzania through the north-eastern corridor which involve regions such as Kilimanjaro, Musoma, Arusha and Tanga whereby some of them stay in the country and greater part of them use Tanzania as a transit corridor going to southern countries of Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique and South Africa (Urassa & Magweiga, 2017). Another entry point is through North Western regions like Rukwa, Kigoma and Kagera from countries such as DRC, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda. According to IOM (2020), there were 1400 Ethiopian irregular migrants stranded in Tanzania in Dar es Salaam region only in the year 2000.

Gezie et al in 2021 carried out a study on “*Exploring factors that contribute to human trafficking in Ethiopia from a socio-ecological perspective*”. From their findings, factors identified as possibly encouraging acts of illegal migration included community attitudes on the status of families with children living abroad; comparative work status at home and abroad versus pay; poor knowledge on the promises given on irregular migration and the reality on the ground, rampant human traffickers along the migration routes.

1.2 Statement of the problem

A healthy transnational migration might be useful for the migrant as well as the source and receiving countries as it might meet the demands of all sides. However, a considerable proportion of global migrants are involved in illegal migration, mainly through human smuggling or trafficking (International Labor Organization, 2017); illegal migration accounted for two-thirds of all transnational migrants in Ethiopia (US Department of State, 2020). Ethiopians are one of the largest groups going south from the Horn of Africa, towards South Africa. In 2009, it was estimated that, over 10,000 Ethiopians are smuggled each year from Ethiopia towards South Africa, crossing many countries including Kenya and Tanzania (Horwood, 2009). Due to the procedures followed in the smuggling or trafficking of Ethiopians, most of them are exposed to so much vulnerability from their trafficking agents and other people whom they come across either on transit or even in their destinations. Majority of irregular immigrants are victims of torture and mistreatment, money extortion by their agents, false promises and disappointments, unfriendly experiences, they frequently experience language barriers, some have poor knowledge on their rights and privileges. Human beings should also be treated with dignity, no matter where they come from or even their affiliation. There are however few studies done to analyze experiences and the welfare of Ethiopian irregular migrants on transit to South Africa. There also lacks enough empirical studies relating to this phenomenon. It is against this background that this study examined the plight of irregular migrants from Ethiopia to the South and a way forward.

1.3 Methodology

The main objective of this study was to establish the experiences and welfare of Ethiopian irregular migrants on their transit to South Africa. This study was largely done through desk top review. Some data were collected using interviews among the detained Ethiopian irregular migrants as a way of needs assessment from 20th March, 2023 to 30th March, 2023. Purposive sampling techniques were used to collect qualitative data which was triangulated to the desktop review data to enrich the findings. Conclusion and recommendations on the way forward were drawn for action as far as the study was concerned.

1.4 Theoretical review

This study was guided by the cumulative causation theory.

Cumulative Causation Theory: In an attempt to explain why migration continues to happen, this theory argues that, one migration leads to another; in the words of Massey, “causation is cumulative”. When one migration occurs, it changes the social context of the origin in a way that instigates subsequent or additional decisions of migration (Massey, 1999). For instance, people who have friends, family members, or relatives abroad have a relatively lower risk after migration which prompts them to migrate. The constant communication with relatives and friend in South Africa is a great pull factor influencing the irregular migration trends today. The cumulative causation theory is explaining the pull factor phenomena. However, the theory fails to explain the state of welfare of the regular migrants on their way to their destination or in their destination. There is however an assumption that, the

sociological perspective explained by this theory carries with it the surrounding vulnerabilities associated with irregular immigrants.

1.5 Review and findings

Different literature sources have revealed the plight of Ethiopian irregular immigrants on their way to South Africa for “better life opportunities”. Some irregular migrants might be in the process of seeking asylum. Detaining or even deporting those with genuine protection claims and whose asylum applications were not considered might threaten their lives more. There are victims of trafficking and suffering among the migrant population (Regional Mixed Migration, 2015).

From some irregular migrants’ experiences, they are promised jobs in South Africa by their traffickers and told will travel from Ethiopia to Kenya by bus then to South Africa by Flight. One of the case narrated that, he paid between 300,000 and 500,000 birr (USD 5000 and USD 9,000) for the journey. He was enticed by his peers in South Africa of the good life in the South. However, his dreams to South Africa did not materialize as he had intercepted and repatriated back to Ethiopia (IOM, 2020).

Majority of Ethiopian irregular migrants often lack the necessary language skills. Without the necessary skills, communication and expressing self becomes a challenge. Those serving you like the migration officers and the police won’t easily understand you. This phenomena might delay or become a stabling block in service delivery for the irregular migrants (Adugna et al, 2019). Once in South Africa, Ethiopians attempt to regularize their status either by submitting formal asylum applications (Kanko et al, 2013; Estifanos, 2015). Those who qualify for asylum or refugee status will frequently need to renew their status. To majority, this may bring a lot of discomfort (Research and Evidence Facility (REF), 2020). This shows the struggles experienced by Ethiopian migrants in their destination country. Without these documentations, it is so hard to get a job. Majority of migrants who lack documentation depend on their friends for survival, something you can’t do forever. Without refugee status, majority of Ethiopian migrants have no access to the formal employment market. This insecure status makes it impossible for them to open bank accounts or apply for leases or credit or get a dependable medical care cover. Their only option is to try to support themselves in the informal economy. A combination of irregularity and informality not only negatively affects economic and social integration, but also exposes migrants to various life related risks (Research and Evidence Facility - REF, 2020).

Either on transit or in their destination, Ethiopian irregular migrants face a lot of violence and trauma. Majority of them do not have legal travelling documents which expose them to more vulnerabilities especially with law and order enforcers. They also travel for long, sometimes in uncomfortable means like lorries which are poorly ventilated, they often lack medical assistance on the way and some may even die. Some roads irregular migrants travel through are so poor and some regions experience extreme weather conditions. In their country of destination, Ethiopian immigrants are exposed to low-skilled work with or without legal paper work which may risk to abuse of their labour rights. They are also traumatized by their smugglers and traffickers who demand more than they had agreed. The economic hardships they face are a big contribution to their inability to afford basic necessities of life including food, shelter, clothing, and all these exposes them to more stress. All the above affect the psychological well-being of irregular migrants to a very big extent (Bilgil et al, 2018).

From the interviews, majority of the responded expressed challenges related to travelling from Ethiopia towards their destination. One of the respondents narrated the following:-

“The whole journey is not as earlier planned. We thought we will travel in a few days to our destination. Unfortunately, you will not even know where you are during the whole journey. It was not smooth as earlier thought. The journey had a lot of challenges” (RP004, 2023).

Another respondent was asked to explain his experience in Ethiopia before making his decision to travel to the South. He narrated the following:

“I regret my current state. I just pray that the Government of Ethiopia would repatriate us back home. This is a great lesson learnt. I will live to tell this story and the force promises. My friend in South Africa contacted me one day on the job opportunities and good life in the South. Little did I know that he colludes with human traffickers to make a kill out of our vulnerable state. I wish I could have used the more than 7000 USD I wasted in this journey to begin a business. My life could have automatically changed. I wish to become an ambassador to preach against this illegal migration when I go back to my country” (RP002, 2023).

Another respondent was asked to comment on their journey and contact with their travelling agent. He narrated the following:-

“Once you cross the border, your phone becomes automatically disconnected and the person in-charge of your communication is your driver (as the middle man) with your agent. You are just doing a trial and error game here. The agent may decide to increase the cost of your transport or illegal bail on transit. You will have to go back to your pocket and pay...you like it or not. This was a real hustle...no relative to borrow money on the way either. This journey was a mere scam” (RP007, 2023).

1.6 Conclusion

After carrying out interviews and reviewing various literatures on the plight of Ethiopian irregular migrants to their destination (South Africa), it can be concluded that, there exists a lot of challenges as far as irregular immigration and settling of Ethiopians is concerned. This has been affecting their psychological and physical well-being too. The following recommendations were drawn as a way forward to address the challenges facing Ethiopian irregular migrants.

1.7 Recommendations

Strict punishment to human smugglers and Traffickers. There is a need for a well-coordinated effort in the concerned countries to fight the human smuggling and trafficking cartels especially with the help of advancement in technology and intelligence information and communication.

Improving the living conditions of Ethiopians in their home country. This is one of the major drivers of irregular migration. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia should help in creating more job opportunities for its citizens.

Awareness creation through the government, religious leaders, elders, as well as the civil society organizations on the implications of irregular migration. This can be supported by investing in re-

integration programmes which aims at solving the needs related to causes of irregular migration in Ethiopia.

Repatriation of irregular migrants: There is a need to consult with the international community for repatriation of Ethiopian irregular migrants back to Ethiopia for purposes of building their country.

References

- Adugna, F., Deshingkar, P. and Ayalew, T. (2019). Brokers, Migrants and the State: Berri Kefach ‘Door Openers’ in Ethiopian Clandestine Migration to South Africa. MOOP Working Paper 56 [available at <http://www.migratingoutofpoverty.org/files/file.php?name=wp56-adugna2019-brokers-migrants-and-the-state.pdf>]. Accessed: 1st May 2023
- Bilgil, O., Kuschiminder, K., Siegel, M. (2018) Return Migrants Perceptions of Living Conditions in Ethiopia: A gendered analysis
- Donato, K. M. & Massey, D. S. (2016). "Twenty-First-Century Globalization and Illegal Migration." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 666(1): 7-26.
- Enhancing Africa’s Response to Transnational Organized Crime (Enact) (2021) Human trafficking into the Southern African region
- Estifanos, Y. (2015). ‘The political economy of transnational social networks and migration risks: the case of irregular migrants from southern Ethiopia to South Africa’. Master’s thesis, University of Oldenburg.
- European Parliamentary Assembly (2006) Assembly debate on 27 June 2006 (18th Sitting) (see Doc. 10924, report of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population, rapporteur: Mr van Thijn). Text adopted by the Assembly on 27 June 2006 (18th Sitting).
- Gezie, L., Yalew, W., Gete, K and Samkange-Zeeb, F. (2021) Exploring factors that contribute to human trafficking in Ethiopia: a socio-ecological perspective. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-021-00725-0>
- Habib, D. (2020) Covid-19 in the Middle East. Policy forum. Retrieved from <https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/www.policyforum.net/covid-19-in-the-middle-east/amp> on 4th May, 2023
- Horwood, C. (2009). In Pursuit of the Southern Dream: Victims of Necessity. Assessment of the irregular movement of men from East Africa and the Horn to South Africa. Geneva: International Organization for Migration
- International Labor Organization (2017) Global estimates of modern slavery: Forced labour and forced marriage. ILO Geneva, Switzerland; Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575479.pdf on 2nd May, 2023
- International Organization for Migration (2023) Key Migration terms. Retrieved from <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms> on 2nd May, 2023
- International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2009). In Pursuit of the Southern Dream: Victims of Necessity – Assessment of the Irregular Movement of Men from East Africa and the Horn to South Africa. Geneva: IOM.
- International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2014) Emergency post-arrival assistance to vulnerable Ethiopian migrants returning from Saudi Arabia, External situation report, 7-9 January, Addis Ababa, International Organization for Migration
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2022). Migrating in Search of the Southern Dream – The Experiences of Ethiopian Migrants Moving Along the Southern Route

- International Organization for Migration. (2013) The wellbeing of economic migrants in South Africa: Health, Gender and Development. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.
- International Organization for Migration. (2020) First Group of Over 1,400 Stranded Ethiopian Migrants Arrive from Tanzania 27 February 2020 Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/first-group-over-1400-stranded-ethiopian-migrants-arrive-tanzania> on 2nd May, 2023
- Kanko, T., Bailey, A. and Teller, C. (2013). 'Irregular migration: causes and consequences of young adult migration from Southern Ethiopia to South Africa'. Paper presented at the XXVII International Population Conference, Busan, 26–31 August
- Mas G. R. (2017). "Onward Migration as a Coping Strategy? Latin Americans Moving from Spain to the UK Post- 2008." *Population, space and place*, 23(3): e2017
- Massey, D. S. (1999). Why Does Immigration Occur? A Theoretical Synthesis. In *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, 34-52. New York: Russel Sage Foundation
- Regional Mixed Migration (2015) Behind bars: The detention of migrants in and from the East and Horn of Africa
- Research and Evidence Facility (REF) (2020) 'Migration barriers and migration momentum: Ethiopian irregular migrants in the Ethiopia–South Africa migration corridor', London and Nairobi: EU Trust Fund for Africa (Horn of Africa Window) Research and Evidence Facility.
- Schuck, P. T. (2018). *Citizens, Strangers and in-Betweens: Essays on Immigration and Citizenship*, Routledge
- Urassa, J. K. & Magweiga, S. R. (2017). "Irregular Migration and Smallholder Farmers" Crop Production: A Case of Kasulu District, Tanzania."
- US Department of State (2014) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013*. Washington: US Department of State.
- US Department of State (2020) *Trafficking in Persons Report: Ethiopia 2020*. Retrieved on 3rd May, 2023 from <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2036261.html>