Shifts in the Trend and Nature of Migration in the Ethiopia-South Africa Migration Corridor
Yordanos S. Estifanos and Laura Freeman
University of Cape Town

Abstract. Over the past 25 years a significant (but unknown) number of migrants from Ethiopia have been migrating to South Africa through the “southern route.” This male-dominated migration is becoming more and more irregular and includes multiple transit countries, largely controlled by human smugglers. The size of the Ethiopian immigrant population in South Africa has increased. The profile of individuals on the move has also changed in terms of migrants’ age, ethnicity, place of origin, gender and socioeconomic status. Youth from rural areas have joined the migration trail, and, increasingly, women are migrating for marriage in South Africa. Today, migrants from southern Ethiopia (Hadiya and Kambata) dominate Ethiopian migration to South Africa. The age and socioeconomic status of the migrants have also changed where teenagers, college graduates and civil servants are entering the migration stream in recent years. Equally changing is the nature and operation of the smuggling and settlement processes. Like the broader field of migration studies in which source and destination countries receive the overwhelming focus, the multiple transit countries Ethiopians on the move to South Africa travel through, and the migration journeys themselves, have not received adequate research attention. The effects these journeys have on the settlement processes are also largely ignored. This article, therefore, explores these emerging patterns with a view to understanding the inequalities faced by Ethiopian migrants on their journey to South Africa and the factors behind it. With the intensification of border closures due to multiple factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, we examine the shift in the nature and trend of smuggling and how it is reflected in inequalities experienced by Ethiopian migrants in South Africa.

Introduction

Globalization processes have brought time-space compression, and enhanced mobility of people across international borders. Such mobilities are, however, reserved to a privileged or select few, as many of the host country governments are increasing efforts to restrain and deter migrants through intensification and diversification of migration control strategies. Moreover, the failure of the powerful blocs — notably the European Union — to find effective internal responses for the so-called “migration crisis” have prompted external responses resulting in European cooperation with third countries that hinge on firm control of those countries’ borders. Consequently, border reinforcements that had existed primarily in the Global North countries are being increasingly adopted everywhere, making the distinctions between Global North and Global South practices unstable. On the other hand, globalization processes are increasingly connecting and disconnecting

---

1 Friedman 2007.
2 Castles 2004; Bakewell 2007.
3 Capesciotti 2017; Graziani 2017.
4 Nawyn 2016.
as well as including and excluding people in developing countries from the corridors of globalization. Against the backdrop of intensifying and diversifying border controls measures that mainly target irregular migrants, many aspiring migrants from developing countries have found themselves excluded from joining the corridors of globalization. In other words, in the context of dwindling legal channels of migration, irregular migration and smuggling are being considered as responses to skewed global economic and political orders. These prompt many aspiring migrants to utilize their social networks as well as depend on the facilitation role of smugglers, making smuggling a reaction to border controls rather than a cause of irregular migration. In this regard Dirk Hoerder notes:

Migrants who understand the economic interests behind cultural facades react by circumventing restrictions, by crossing borders without documents. Individually, they attempt to equalize life-course opportunities. “Illegal” migrants question the legitimacy of inequality and the morality of global apartheid.

Irregular migration, therefore, is mainly triggered by — and is a response to — growing inequalities within and between different regions of the world. Many Ethiopians have been migrating to South Africa over the past 25 years in pursuit of better life opportunities as well as with the intention of using South Africa a transit to European and North American countries. However, compared to the migration of Ethiopians to other destinations, their migration to South Africa is a relatively recent phenomenon that coincided with regime changes in both states in the first half of the 1990s. After the dawn of democracy in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) led government instituted progressive refugee laws that permitted asylum seekers to claim for temporary status or asylum with the right to work and study. The end of a military regime in Ethiopia in 1991 also relaxed policies that regulated internal and international mobility.

These regime changes enhanced mobility within and outside of Ethiopia and South Africa. Among others, the new regime in Ethiopia eased internal and international mobility through instituting access to passports and travel documents, signaled its commitment to international human rights and the right to mobility laws, and ratified trade and mobility agreements with

---

5 The term irregular migration is used here because of the negative image an alternative term, which is illegal, carries. However, we acknowledge the fact that terms like irregular migration and transit countries are contested and are the subject of academic debate.
6 Blij 2009; Lucht 2012.
7 Castles 2003; Hoerder 2002.
8 De Haas 2013; Brachet 2018.
9 Hoerder 2002: 578.
10 Kanko et al. 2013.
11 Estifanos 2015.
12 Estifanos 2015.
13 Wehmhoerner 2013.
neighboring countries, including Kenya.\textsuperscript{15} The easing of movement was one factor in motivating mobility southwards in what has become known as the “southern route” from Ethiopia, through east and southern Africa to South Africa.\textsuperscript{16}

This article examines the shifts in the nature of migration and operation of the smuggling networks the implications these have on the settlement processes. It specifically aims to:

- Examine the shifts in the profile of migrants and the factors behind these shifts;
- Examine the shifts in the operation of the smuggling networks and the factors behind them; and
- Examine how migration journeys inform and dictate settlement processes including the implication for inequalities.

The article begins by outlining the research methods followed by a discussion and analysis of the findings. The article concludes by considering the implications of the study.

**Research Methods**

Findings from previous studies and recent MIDEQ field research conducted in South Africa and Ethiopia informed the analysis in this article. One of the previous studies was conducted by the lead author in 2014 and focused on examining the operation of the smuggling networks in the Ethiopia-South Africa migration corridor. The other study was conducted in 2018, under the auspices of the Migrating out of Poverty Research Consortium (MOOP), and focused on the migration industry that attends Ethiopian migration to South Africa. This article thus draws on findings from these two previous studies as well as ongoing field research that is being conducted in South Africa (Eastern Cape and Western Cape provinces) and in Ethiopia (Addis Ababa, Hosaena and Durame) as part of the MIDEQ Hub which focuses on the impact of migration on development and inequality in the Global South countries.

In the 2014 study, interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 20 Ethiopian informants in Johannesburg and its satellite informal townships in July, August and September. After analyzing findings from the fieldwork in South Africa, further fieldwork was conducted in Addis Ababa and Hosaena town with 15 informants in November 2014. Of the 35 interviews, five were females and 30 were males. The 2018 MOOP study of the migration industry relied on 45 interviews conducted in Johannesburg and Durban (South Africa) and in Addis Ababa and Hosaena (Ethiopia) between August 2018 and December 2018.

In the ongoing MIDEQ research project, 30 plus in-depth interviews, key informant interviews (KII), in-depth interviews (II), and FGDs were conducted in South Africa (July, August and September 2021) and in Ethiopia (October 2021). In addition to immigrants in South Africa, the 2021 MIDEQ field research reached out returnees and prospective migrants, repatriated migrants (from Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Zimbabwe), Government officials in charge of

\textsuperscript{15} Asnake and Zerihun 2015.

\textsuperscript{16} Estifanos 2015.
reintegration programs at Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs (BOLSA) office in Hosaena and Durame, Experts on issues at Wachamo University (in Hosaena) and the Ethiopian Diaspora Agency in Addis Ababa, Practitioners (International Organization for Migration - IOM Ethiopia), a former expert at Ethiopian Embassy in Tanzania, and interpreters and translators at Malawi prison.

In all of the 2014, 2018 and 2021 field research, field notes, informal and formal discussions, observations, a transect walk and a literature review informed the research.

**Shifts in the Profile of Migrants**

As noted above, the migration of Ethiopians to South Africa in the first half of the 1990s started because of a combined effect of relatively simple driving factors such as regime changes in Ethiopia and South Africa, the ease of mobility that followed the regime changes, and the intention by the former migrants to use South Africa as a transit country to enter European and North American countries.17 On the other hand, coincidence in the appointment of the former Ambassador from Hosaena and Durame areas to South Africa (in 2000/2001) and the politically unstable period in Hosaena and Durame areas leading up to and following the 2000 Ethiopian national election, instigated the migration of youth and young adults from these areas to South Africa.18

Over the past 25 years, the Ethiopia-South Africa migration has transformed its nature and operation. Among other shifts, the migrants’ place of origin has changed from urban to rural areas. Migrants from Addis Ababa and other cities of Ethiopia that were the first to arrive in South Africa, in the mid-1990s, have been replaced by migrants from southern Ethiopia in the years 2000 to 2005 and afterwards.19 There was also an increase in number of migrants as well as diversification of migrants in terms of gender, age, and socioeconomic status.20 Even among migrants from southern Ethiopia, migrants who originate from rural areas of Hosaena and Durame overtook those who originate from these towns.

In terms of changing socioeconomic status of migrants, evidence from our informants indicates that college and university graduates and civil servants have joined the migration to South Africa in recent years. The visible inequalities among migrant sending and non-sending families have attracted those who have a better socioeconomic status to join the migration. On the other hand, along with the lack of employment opportunities, the less value that has been attached to education, in recent years, in Hosaena and Durame areas also pushed migrants with better education status in recent years.

Demand for labour is one of the factors that shifted the profile of migrants heading to South Africa. The demand for labour by established Ethiopian migrants — commonly called ‘bosses’ — who had started to dominate the business in the informal economy of South Africa, resulted in the recruitment of labor from home. A transition in the nature of immigrants’ business that has changed from door-to-door to tuck shop business is increasing the demand for a reliable

---

17 Estifanos 2015
18 Teshome 2010; Estifanos and Zack 2019.
19 Tsedeke 2018.
20 Yordanos 2021.
labour force on two accounts: the first is a need on the side of bosses for relief from the stressful business environment in the townships where the majority of the tuck-shops are located; the second is the expansion of the individual tuck-shops to different corners (within a township) or to other townships which further require the recruitment of additional labour.

Another factor that changed the profile of migrants is a growing demand for females in the marriage market. This is mainly attributed to the types of documentation that the majority of the migrants have, or the lack of it, which restricted their mobility. The majority of Ethiopian migrants in South Africa do not have the right documentation to travel out of South Africa for business or leisure. Many of them have spent 5 to 15 years and beyond without travelling outside of South Africa. While working and living in South Africa some of them who succeeded financially want to achieve their transition to adulthood through marriage. While Ethiopian migrants in other destinations (mainly in European and North American countries) have the privilege to travel back home and search for a soul mate, Ethiopian migrants in South Africa are denied their mobility. Those migrants who have established themselves in the South Africa have designed mechanisms to smuggle in prospective wives from their home villages. This has contributed to the shifting profile of recent migrants to South Africa where females are migrating as prospective wives.

Moreover, the profile of migrants is changing in terms of age in that teenage boys and girls are joining the migration. This is partly attributed to a transformation in the nature of relationship between established and recent Ethiopian migrants in South Africa. This relationship has over the years changed from a gifting and sharing one in the initial years of the migration (1995 to 2005) into an exploitative one in later years (2010 to 2020).21 One of the consequences is that established migrants are growingly targeting vulnerable group of migrants such as teenage boys (for business) or teenage girls (for marriage).

Shifts in the Operation of the Smuggling Networks

Socioeconomic and political changes in source, transit and destination countries, which are in turn shaped by changes at global level, have also changed the migration landscape over the course of time. As opposed to global financial transactions and the global flow of goods, cross-border population flows are becoming highly regulated by state policies. The regulations often operate through social sorting that involves sexual, gender, racial and class inequalities. Often, the social sorting start long before travelers reach the border.22 Hence, for non-professional labour migrants, very few visa categories or legal immigration options are available, and, if they are, they are typically of a short-term nature.23

As indicated elsewhere host country governments are also increasing efforts to restrain and deter irregular migrants through dramatic intensification and diversification of migration control strategies.24 Moreover, borders are being externalized: through bilateral and multilateral cooperation as well as criminalizing and securitizing irregular migration and smuggling, host

22 Khosravi 2011.
23 Piper and Ball 2001.
countries are aiming to create effects outside their territories. In this regard, there is evidence that Libya, the Sudan, and Ethiopia often accept development aid in exchange for intercepting clandestine refugees before they reach European territory.

Border control and closures have also been reinforced in transit countries such as Kenya and Tanzania. Consequently, only a small number of people enjoy unrestricted mobility rights while most people are caught within borders. This results in increasing numbers of undocumented migrants as well as contributing to the proliferation of irregular migration routes and the facilitation roles of smugglers (and their local agents), which has boosted the smuggling business.

In the case of recent migrants, the smugglers found themselves operating in a capitalist system and for many of them profit making became a primary motive. This is in line with the argument that powerful market forces boosted the smuggling business to high levels. This, therefore, has become a suitable ground for the smuggling business to expand, which supports the demand-price theory of economics: as demand for migration increases, the smuggling price increases. Smuggling networks are also taking advantage of the increasing gulf between the desire to migrate and the restrictions imposed on it. Changes in Ethiopia and South Africa and the gaps in international mobility rights and the sovereignty of nation states further complicated the operation of the smuggling networks.

In a nutshell a combination of structural, social, legal, political, economic and cultural factors reinforced one another to perpetuate the migration and complicate the operation of the smuggling. In the process, the nature of the transnational social and smuggling networks have gone through significant change. This has also stimulated the creation of a community enterprise around the smuggling business. The latter is particularly strong at border towns and refugee camps across transit countries.

Subsequently multiple actors joined in the smuggling networks that extend into the settlement processes. What used to be facilitated within narrow familial social networks, for former migrants, involving a handful of actors, has transformed into an organized smuggling operation that attracts multiple actors from near and far as well as involving formal and informal institutions stretched across source, transit and destination countries and beyond.

The type of people who participate in financing the migration has also showed substantial change. In late 1990s and early 2000s only one or two parties were involved in financing the migration. In these early periods of migration, for example, families contributed (from their own source) or organized iqub to raise money. In the coming years, however, other parties began to get

25 Khosravi 2011; Capesciotti 2017; Graziani 2017.
26 Andersson 2014; Albahari 2015.
27 Estifanos and Zack 2019.
28 Blij 2009; De Haas 2013; Brachet 2018.
30 Estifanos and Zack 2019.
31 Estifanos and Zack 2019.
32 Fekadu et al. 2019.
33 Iqub is a roving saving club where members monthly contribute a certain amount of money and award the total sum to each member in turns. It is a sort of microfinancing scheme that functions based on trust.
involved in financing, such as the diasporas, the families by borrowing/selling their assets and the smuggled migrants by borrowing money from someone else or selling their assets.

Part of the reason for the increase in the number of actors financing the migration is an increase in the smuggling fee. The amount of money required to smuggle a migrant has significantly increased over time especially after the September 11 attack in the USA, after which time borders everywhere became strict including in Eastern and Southern African countries in the fight against terrorism. Our informants noted that different amounts of smuggling fee are paid for the entire journey, as well as different charges demanded for different legs of the journey. Market forces also attract experienced smugglers who have linkages with government structures based in source, transit and destination countries. Along with border controls, the banning of irregular migration from Ethiopia by the Ethiopian government in 2013 and subsequent attempt to breakdown the smuggling network, has also shifted the operation of the smuggling network because the chief smugglers have moved to other countries further complicating the operation of the smuggling network.

The huge rise in the smuggling fees has left many aspiring prospective migrants involuntarily immobile while giving access to those who are financially better off to migrate. This has shifted the operation of the smuggling networks in a different way because chief smugglers have started to be hired from South Africa. During an interview conducted with a migration expert at Wachamo University, in Hossaena, on Oct 6, 2021, it was noted that:

The chief smugglers have moved to other countries. They take the documents of prospective migrants. You don’t find the chief smugglers here [Hossaena]. Some of them have based themselves in South Africa and they come to different transit countries up until Kenya, but never cross the Ethiopian border. But they have subordinates who process some of their cases. In fact these days one doesn’t need chief smuggler because hosts in South Africa will complete the required processes from there and inform prospective migrants “A certain person will meet you in a certain place.” Hosts also provide the phone numbers of persons to contact by the time prospective migrants reach Moyale. Afterwards prospective migrants leave their village and head to Moyale. There are local agents in between that connect prospective migrants with the foot soldiers of chief smugglers in Moyale. In the past these local agents used to guide small groups of migrants to Moyale, but today they are using phones to guide the migrants. They are invisible!

Mekasha, a migrant-turned-smuggler, interviewed in Hossaena (in 2014) explained linkages between formal financing and the smuggling business whereby bank, police and airlines officers in source, transit and destination countries cooperate with chief smugglers to smooth out the smuggling process. Tadele interviewed in Johannesburg (in 2018) reinforced Mekasha’s point and indicated that the smuggling industry is increasingly bridging formal and informal economies. He shared how migrants, smugglers, hosts and financial institutions work together to either facilitate the migration or reactivate cut off networks or enable settlement:
An Ethiopian smuggler in Malawi sent me a bank account to my phone. The name of the account was registered under a Somali person. Using Absa Bank in Johannesburg, I transferred the money to that account. I also sent the confirmation code that I got from the bank to my brother, who was stuck in Malawi. We managed to reactivate the cut off smuggling network and the new smuggler sent my brother straight to Johannesburg. He reached South Africa after a week.

Moreover, many recent migrants indicated that they received help from random people in transit countries when smuggling networks were cut off. Some of the random people are not even aware of their involvement but provide support for the migrants through provision of information and linking migrants with local smuggler agents, supplying food, shelter or hiding places, providing transport facilities in crossing strict borders or facilitating money transfers from migrants’ relatives. They do it either on a remuneration basis or out of altruism, becoming the “Good Samaritan” for disorientated strangers.

Narratives from our informants indicate that former migrants had no adequate access to information regarding the routes and means of travelling. They also did not have access to technology to either create or reactivate their networks whenever they were cut off. Nor did they have means to transfer money and information during their journey. This is not the case for recent migrants. Advancements in technology have added another layer of complexity to the smuggling operation. Individual migrants have also become active agents in smuggling networks, and they take advantage of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) to actualize their migration.

Hence, advancement in ICTs provided migrants in transit countries and smugglers a platform to not only produce and disseminate migration related information but also created a space to raise money (from hosts or families back home or the diaspora population in European and North American countries) and transfer money. The expansions of telecom services have also boosted the operation of the smuggling networks. Teddy interviewed in Hermanus, South Africa, on August 21, 2021 noted that:

When I was in Kenya they [the chief smuggler’s agents] gave me South African SIM card. When I reach in Johannesburg I called on the number they gave me, and then they instructed me where to go to get a taxi. I came to South Africa with my sister’s daughter (niece), we were looking for a taxi but we didn’t know which way to take, where to go or how to call a taxi. The security noticed us and caught us. He handed us to an officer. We called for the chief smuggler and he came for us immediately to bail us. Because he knew the officers they talked to each other and let us go.

Competition among smugglers has also led to the interception, interruption, and stranding of migrants heading to South Africa. This in turn led to infighting between them. There is also

---

34 Faist 2000; Ayalew 2018.
35 Ayalew 2018.
emerging competition amongst the smugglers in recent years, as they are responding both to increasingly stringent regulations and policing structures erected to thwart their business, as well as to increasing business competition amongst themselves. Bisrat, a former smuggler interviewed in Johannesburg (in 2018), explained that what started as a simple travel agent type role of smuggling is turning into an aggressively competitive business:

In the earlier years when I smuggled people, I used to fetch them from the airport and buy them food and drink at a decent café. But gradually, competitions emerged amongst smugglers. Once, an Ethiopian smuggler blocked 16 ‘migrants’ of mine after they arrived in South Africa. I retaliated by intercepting his ‘migrants’ en route and demanded money for their release. This resulted in conflict between us. After that I quit the business, because I have seen some smugglers even killing each other because of ego and competition.

**Shifts in Migration Route Modes of Transport and Risks**

The migration routes followed and the modes of transport used have also shifted over the years. Narratives from our informants indicate that the majority of the former Ethiopian migrants to South Africa, in the second half of the 1990s, have completed their journeys within short period of time, with little or no smuggler involvement and without encountering significant risks and dangers. For recent migrants, however, the migration routes and the modes of transport used differ depending on the financial capacity of migrants and their social and political capital.

The most common transit countries used by former migrants to South Africa include Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. However, with the intensifying border control measures in transit countries such as Kenya and Tanzania, many of the recent migrants use boats to travel some distances over the Indian Ocean rim when the overland route is unsafe. Due to increased border enforcement in Kenya and Tanzania, for example, there is an emerging sea route to South Africa, across the Indian Ocean rim, exposing migrants to a different kind of risk than is prevalent in the on-land migration. Tadele, from Hossaena, interviewed in South Africa (in 2018), indicated that some migrants were even throwing themselves into the sea:

We had nothing to talk to the boat captains. When they were hungry, they stop the ship in the middle of the sea to eat. They don’t care about us even when the migrants throw themselves into the sea. There was a boy with us and after we travelled a little, he lost his control. He lost it. He couldn’t control himself, and he threw himself into the sea. On the next day a big storm came and many of the migrants drowned into the sea. The survivors were smaller than the ones drowned. We travelled on the high sea like this and reached Malawi border to a place called Caronga.

Another shift in terms of mode of transport used is the use of air transport. The flight could be direct to South Africa or to one of the neighboring countries of South Africa. However,
as flying is the most direct entry into South Africa, it is a costly option for most migrants: it also requires having the necessary paperwork, including obtaining a passport, visas and ticket. Our informants noted that the flying option is mainly reserved for female prospective wives migrants who are recruited by established Ethiopian males in South Africa.

Even for those who travel on land, many of our informants noted that the smugglers demanded additional payments as they had to change the usual migration routes, retiming the journeys (from daytime to past midnight) or make repeated attempts to cross borders. As a result, the migration routes fluctuate depending on the physical and legal barriers erected against smugglers. Our informants indicated that smugglers bribe border police and immigration officials whenever possible and profitable. They also seek help from regular residents and institutions like churches and other actors along the way to find or create loopholes and continue their journey.

An extension of the changes in the migration routes and modes of transport is the difference in the risks former and recent migrants’ encounter. While the majority of the former migrants consider their journey to South Africa as an adventure (without encountering violent risks as well as having good relationship with smugglers and among them) recent migrants must endure grave risks and their relationship with smugglers is often tense. Unlike the former migrants, the migration of recent migrants to South Africa is full of interruption, interception, rerouting, making repeated attempts, etc. This has significantly increased the risks and dangers of recent migrants while strengthening the power of smugglers.

For the majority of the recent migrants’ border crossings have increasingly been undertaken by using a combination of walking and vehicles. In an attempt to bypass strict border controls, smugglers either hide migrants at roadblocks or border crossings or bribe officials posted there. Our informants reported extremely dangerous kinds of hiding places including placing migrants at the bottom of large trucks or stowing them inside loads of goods or cramming them in-between cattle that are transported across borders of transit countries. In so doing, they commoditize migrants in transit. Tarekegn interviewed in Johannesburg (in 2018) shares his experience on how he crossed from Malawi to Mozambique:

While we were crossing Tete Bridge, on foot, one of the migrants fell sick. While we were trying to treat him, the border police caught and took us back to Malawi border. Then they told us to return to Malawi and we returned to Lilongwe. After some hours the smugglers slotted 12 of us at the bottom of a truck, between the tires, and smuggled us into Zimbabwe.

**Inequalities During the Settlement Process**

The migration experiences of recent migrants indicate that many of them have to pass through multiple transit countries, make repeated attempts at border crossings, spend tough times in harsh prisons, are smothered in containers, undertake extended journeys past mid-night, etc. Their experiences en route have implications for their settlement processes.

One extension of the migration experiences of recent migrants in transit countries is that the extended migration journey affects the physical and mental health of migrants. Unlike the former migrants, who enjoyed relatively short time and less risk en route, the majority of the recent
migrants, especially males who traveled over land, experienced health related complications upon arrival in South Africa. This leaves them at the hands of their hosts to help them recuperate. It also leaves the hosts in a better position to exploit recent migrants. The problem is severe in the case of migrants who don’t have hosts in South Africa because they are left to their own devices either to get medical treatment upon their arrival or even jobs later on. Their irregularity combines with their informality, which is the nature of the available labor market in South Africa, to augment their vulnerabilities.

An interview with a migration expert at Wachemo University on Oct 6, 2021 noted that there are some people in South Africa who take advantage of the situation. He goes on:

Upon their arrival in Johannesburg most of them know that there is a place called Jeppe in the city. Those migrants who lost contact with their hosts or those who do not have hosts will go to Jeppe desperately looking for someone. There are some Ethiopians in Jeppe who asks if the migrant is lost migrant or has no host. If the reply is “Yes” or “My host is far away,” these people welcomes them and make sure that they take shower and receive medical treatment. By the way many of these migrants are badly hurt during their journey and need medical attention. So, these Jeppe people provide them with sanitation service and medical treatment as well as provide them with a place to take rest. Afterwards they will ask their hosts to pay for their expenditures plus a profit margin and connect them with their hosts.

Another extension of the irregular migration of recent migrants is that some of the established migrants (hosts) do not want to process permit papers for newly arriving recent migrants. This is further supported by the presence of protracted bureaucracy, inefficiency and corruption at the South African Home Affairs office. The resulting unequal power relations, between established and recent migrants, have implications for inequalities because it limits the physical, social and business mobility of recent migrants.

Narratives from our informants indicate that the impact is felt differently in gender terms where recent female migrants tend to have less access to documentation (see also Netshikulwe, Nyamnjoh and Garba in this volume). This has limited the activities of many recent migrants in terms of their contribution to the domestic economy. A lack of physical mobility entails disparity in socialization, between males and females, which later translates into disparities in social capital, which also leaves many wives under the control of their husbands.

Financing of recent migrants through borrowing, particularly borrowing money from hosts and relatives in South Africa, has implications for inequalities in the settlement process of recent migrants. To start with, that recent migrants have travelled to South Africa on borrowed money entails debt entrapment where recent migrants are expected or obliged to pay either in cash or in kind. In additional to their obligation to pay their debts, recent migrants become emotionally dependent on their hosts or established Ethiopian migrants in South Africa. This leaves the latter in a better position to take advantage of the prevailing situation of recent migrants in South Africa (a combination of irregularity and informality) to exploit the former.
In this regard, discussions of networks as job providers in the settlement processes are too easily coupled with assumptions that those jobs represent, or will eventually lead to, upward mobility. However, there is the issue of timing whereby social networks and relations could become exploitative over time, particularly in the context of undocumented migrants. Cranford suggested the need to pay attention to the contexts within which social networks become mechanisms for downgrading rather than platforms for upward mobility. The experiences of Ethiopian migrants in South Africa over the past 25 years indicate that migrants’ social networks have transformed from gifting and caring into an exploitative and entrapping one. This entails that majority of the recently arriving migrants are increasingly becoming available victims of exploitations. An interview with a migrant called Teshale in Port Elizabeth on October 8, 2021 supports this argument:

To begin with, former migrants are kind and supportive for new arrivals that they know back at home. Thus, my acquaintances that I met here used to give me 100 or 200 rand each. Apart from the financial support I got from my uncle particularly; we, a batch of newcomers, were able to access a 10,000 monetary support for each of us from our relatives in Ethiopia. Most of all, a generous individual presented himself as a guarantee for us to get a credit supply of goods that amounts up to a maximum of 20,000 rand. So having such financial and emotional backup, we managed to conquer a strange world of business as a street vendor.

On the other hand, a significant increase in the smuggling fees along with intensification and diversification of border control measures has resulted in competition among smugglers. This has led to the interception or interruption of the migration journeys by competing smugglers where recent migrants were asked to pay additional payments in transit countries or ransom even after their arrival in South Africa. Often, the ransoms are paid by the hosts or relatives in South Africa, which has implications impacting on inequalities during the settlement processes, as recent migrants are required to pay the additional money either in cash or in kind. In this regard, some of the smugglers in transit countries have created linkages with their agents in South Africa so that the latter take control of migrants upon their arrival. Abera a migrant interviewed in Hermanus (South Africa) on August 21, 2021 noted that:

The smuggling fee for my journey was made in two installments. It was paid for a smuggler in Kembata. The chief smuggler was in South Africa, so my family pays the money to his family who were living in Kembata. The first installment was 35,000 and the second is also 35,000. However, after I reached South Africa the chief smuggler complained and received additional 7,000 rand. The additional payment was counted as debt on me, and I was expected to pay it for my host.

---

36 Waite and Lewis 2017.
37 Cranford 2005.
38 Estifanos and Zack 2019.
Another consequence of irregular migration on inequalities between former and recent migrants is attributed to the time of arrival of recent migrants in South Africa. During the time of former migrants, it was easier to get access to documentation. Hence, among Ethiopian migrants a few that belong to the former cohort of migrants have refugee IDs, Permanent Residence or a South African passport and enjoy mobility within and outside of South Africa. These documentations also provided opportunities for former migrants to formalize their businesses. Those who have the so called “status” paper can open personal bank account, rent houses and renew their licenses. They also have better access to social infrastructures such as access to health and education (including to their children) while many recent migrants who do not even have asylum seeking permit are immensely suffering.

The documentation related problems are also manifested in inequalities between migrants’ ability to manage remittances and their investments in Ethiopia. Those migrants who have Permanent Residence and Refugee ID could travel home to identify business opportunities as well as manage their investments while those who lack these documents (many of whom are recent migrants) are left in a vulnerable position and are either exploited of their money or denied of their properties by their families, relatives and friends back home. Moreover, those Ethiopians in South Africa who cannot move home are unable to manage the purposes on which their remittances are used. Hence, documentation seems an important factor that create inequalities among recent and former migrants in terms of business travel (not only to Ethiopia but to other countries such as China and Dubai) as well as in terms of engaging in better and safer investments in Ethiopia and South Africa.

These inequalities, which partly emanate from the differences in the migration experiences of former and recent migrants, are reinforced by a combination of socioeconomic, cultural and structural factors prevailing in the present day informal economy of South Africa. Changing factors in the host setting such as growing restriction in the informal labor market; inefficient asylum case processing; mounting and intermittent xenophobic violence; and a hostile political narrative that scapegoats migrants for the delicate internal problems of South Africa augment the already unbalanced power relations between recent migrants and established ones.39

Hence, the majority of the recent migrants face the intersection of risks associated with irregularity and informality and the precarity of their political asylum-seeking status, which is renewed for periods as short as a month after which they are illegal migrants until the status is renewed. This creates situations where established Ethiopian migrants are able to shield themselves from risk by placing more vulnerable migrants in the businesses that are at highest risk as well as exploit them.

Conclusion

Over the course of the past two and half decades, the profile of Ethiopian migrants as well as the nature and operation of the smuggling networks have shifted significantly. While smugglers were the main facilitators of the migration of Ethiopians to South Africa today smugglers have

become just one strand of the multidimensional and multiple actors within a complex web of transnational networks that is stretched across source, transit and destination countries. The transnational networks are also vertically extended and horizontally stretched with temporal and structural dimensions embedded within them.

Narratives from our informants also indicate that instead of reducing irregular migration and breaking down smuggling networks, measures that aimed to control borders and stem irregular migration, in an unequal and globalizing world, complicated the operation of the smuggling networks. Moreover, such measures, instead of reducing irregular migration, have also contributed to increasing smuggling fees, intensifying migration risks en route and reinforcing exploitations of recent migrants upon arrival. These have a lingering effect on inequalities within the Ethiopian community leaving recent Ethiopian migrants in precarious and vulnerable situations. In the context of irregular immigrants and their settlement processes in the informal economy, the experiences of recent migrants do not support the argument that migration empowers and boosts the agency of migrants.

A restrictive migration policy in transit countries and tightening labor market policies in South Africa, an increase in the size of immigrant populations, abnormal competition among immigrants in the informal economy, and lack of language and other essential skills further augments inequalities between established and recent Ethiopian migrants in South Africa.

Despite the measure that are being undertaken to stem irregular migration, the narrative from our informants also indicates that the migration of Ethiopians to South Africa is not going to abate for some time to come. The presence of large numbers of involuntarily immobile potential migrants, actual and perceived feeling of relative deprivation among prospective migrants, differences in multidimensional opportunities between the informal economies of Ethiopia and South Africa, involvement of government officials at various bureaucratic and administrative structures across source, transit and destination countries in the smuggling networks, the transnational nature of the smuggling operation with a capacity to change its direction and nature (when faced with interventions) and an increasing demand for prospective wives and trustworthy labor by established Ethiopian migrants in South Africa etc. boost the migration momentum.

Finally, narratives from our informants show that the argument that smugglers provide protection from below for migrants, in the prevailing situation in the informal economy of South Africa, is questionable. In other words, in as much as social networks could serves as networks of support and protection during the settlement processes of irregular migrants, they could also be networks of exploitation and entrapment. In this regard it is worth noting that irregular migrants who settle in in the informal economies of the host countries need protection from above. Therefore, the narrative that scapegoats and criminalizes migrant entrepreneurs such as Ethiopian migrants in South Africa as well as misrepresents their operations in the informal economy needs reconsideration.
References


—. *Towards the Sociology of Migration and Social Transformation*. Oxford University, 2003.


de Haas, H. “Smuggling is a Reaction to the Border.” Online blog, 2013. http://heindehaas.blogspot.de/2013/10/smuggling-is-reaction-to-border.html


Estifanos, Y. “The Political Economy of Transnational Social Networks and Migration Risks:
“Shifts in the Trend and Nature” — Estifanos and Freeman


Teller, C. and Hailemariam, A. (eds.) The Demographic Transition and Development in Africa: The Unique


