

# LIMEN

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4 (2021/2)



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MIGRATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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**Frontispiece:**

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## Irregular Migration of Ethiopian Youths to Saudi Arabia: The Case of Atsibi Wonberta Woreda of Tigray Regional State

Getachew Zeru, Tewolde Tsehaye

### Abstract

Irregular youth migration is one of the fastest-growing forms of migration in the Horn of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular. Different research outputs reveal that because of both push and pull factors regarding irregular migration; many migrants are vulnerable to various problems, including discrimination, exploitation and abuse. Such migrants are also in danger of being exploited by criminal institutions involved in human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Such crimes constitute a serious violation of the human rights of their victims.

Atsibi Wonberta is a woreda of Tigray Regional State. It has become a matter of serious concern and a priority area for research and action in this study due to the various challenges and impacts it has on migrants, sending, and transiting to the destination countries. In the study area, so far there is no well-integrated approach in dealing with the issue and addressing the root causes and enabling factors that result in irregular migration. This research project critically examines the root causes and drivers of irregular youth migration in Atsibi Wonberta Woreda. Moreover, it is intended to identify the factors that hinder efforts to mitigate irregular migration of youths in the study area. In doing so, the study relies on a qualitative research approach with an exploratory research design and a purposive sample selection technique. It also depends on primary and secondary data sources.

**Keywords:** irregular migration, youths, Atsbi Wonberta Woreda, Saudi Arabia, human trafficking

### Introduction

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Migration is a general term to describe the occurrence of the movement of individuals, groups or populations looking for relatively permanent changes of residence. The number of both legal and irregular international migrants has been growing dramatically over the past decades. The number of international migrants worldwide

was 173 million in 2000; 222 million in 2010; and 244 million in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Globally, there were 281 million international legal and irregular migrants in 2020, which equates to 3.6 percent of the global population.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, irregular migration has become a global concern due to the various challenges and impacts it has on migrants, sending, and transit as well as destination countries. Furthermore, migration in the general sense and irregular migration in particular has been increasing rapidly over the past decades and has become a matter of serious concern and a priority area for action. Therefore, practical measures aimed at addressing irregular migration need proper investigation of root causes, drivers and other related factors that influence individuals/groups to migrate irregularly by endangering their lives.<sup>3</sup>

Different scholars and institutions in Ethiopia have studied irregular migration. However, there are research gaps in addressing the root causes and drivers of the irregular migration of youths in the study area (Atsibi Wonberta Woreda of Tigray Regional State). Most of the academic and policy-oriented investigations conducted in the study area deals with the international migration of Ethiopians to the countries of the Middle East. These mainly focus on trafficking, specially on girls, women and children that are more vulnerable; as well as on abusive working conditions in the destination countries and the role of remittances in the Ethiopian economy. However, they only scantily examine why youths migrate irregularly to Saudi Arabia and the factors that challenge the mitigation of irregular migration in the study area.

Therefore, this study has been conducted to fill these research gaps and to explore the root causes and drivers of irregular migration of youths, as well as why irregular migration becomes a *culture* in the study area. In addition to these, the study has been conducted to identify the mitigating mechanisms of irregular migration and to investigate factors that challenge the mitigation of irregular migration in the study area. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative exploratory research design was employed by the researchers.

## 1. Related literature review

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The intensity, diversity and overall complexity of international migration in general and the irregular migration of youths in particular are linked to human trafficking

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<sup>1</sup> AHIUME 2015.

<sup>2</sup> ILO 2021.

<sup>3</sup> DERYA 2012.

and human smuggling. They are also strongly associated with globalization, as rapid advances in transportation and communication technology have made it easier, cheaper and faster. Moreover, technological progress has facilitated migration by not only lowering resource constraints on mobility but also because it has become easier for migrants to stay in touch with their family and community members, to remit money and to travel back and forth between host and origin countries.<sup>4</sup>

Conflicts, poverty, income inequality, political intolerance, unemployment and/or underemployment, economic disparities and income differentials between the sending and destination countries are among the reasons that compel people to leave their homes in search of better futures for themselves and their families. Migration and human trafficking from developing countries, particularly from East Africa including Ethiopia, are expected to continue rising because of persisting economic and well-being gaps with developed countries.<sup>5</sup>

As legal pathways for migration have diminished, migrants are falling prey to smugglers and human traffickers. Cross-border “irregular migration” facilitated by human smugglers and traffickers is increasingly becoming a socio-economic and security problem for states. Various contributing factors have been suggested for this increasing crisis of irregular migration. For instance, Koser claims that “the reason that increasing numbers of migrants are moving in an irregular rather than a legal way is mainly because of increasing restrictions on legal movements, mostly in destination countries”.<sup>6</sup> In fact, legal pathways are readily available to highly skilled people with recognized qualifications.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the lack of legal pathways for migration has contributed to the increase of irregular migration and record numbers of deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, with more than 5,000 people losing their lives in 2016 alone.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, significant numbers of deaths were also recorded in the Gulf of Aden. For example, in 2021, the IOM’s Missing Migrants Project recorded 109 migrant deaths and disappearances, mostly Ethiopian nationals who drowned while attempting to cross the Gulf of Aden. Many others also died in the Djiboutian desert from harsh environmental conditions resulting in dehydration and starvation.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, irregular youth migration is one of the fastest-growing forms of migration in the Horn of Africa. Movement in the region is by nature mainly irregular,

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<sup>4</sup> CZAİKA – HAAS 2014.

<sup>5</sup> AU 2018.

<sup>6</sup> KOSE 2007, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> NEWLAND – RIESTER 2018.

<sup>8</sup> ALJAZEERA 2016.

<sup>9</sup> IOM 2022.

as there are very limited options for regular movements. In addition, the legal measurements implemented by several countries, such as bans on overseas labour migration in Ethiopia and Kenya, also increase irregular migration.<sup>10</sup>

Migration routes in Africa are constantly evolving and changing. In recent years, the eastern route (Gulf of Aden migration route) has witnessed increased numbers of migrants, particularly from the Horn of Africa, moving to the Gulf countries and beyond. Migrants are vulnerable to abuse by smugglers and traffickers. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, sexual and gender-based violence, and other risks. According to ILO and UNIDO as well as RMMS Ethiopia is among the leading states both as a contributor to irregular migrants to the Middle East and Europe and as a receiver of mass migrants from neighbouring states, who can be treated as refugees.<sup>11</sup>

To address the intense increment of irregular migration challenges, the Government of Ethiopia has adopted a series of development policies and program frameworks, particularly since the beginning of the millennium. The Governments' five-year Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP 2011–2015) and GTP II (2016–2020) aimed to accelerate sustainable development, which speeds up economic growth as a means of reducing poverty and creating jobs, as well as achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, there are increasing challenges in absorbing the huge number of youths joining the job-demanding category. With approximately three million young Ethiopians entering the labor force every year, ensuring productive employment opportunities for them is one of the challenges posed in both rural and urban areas.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, growing numbers of Ethiopians have been looking for job opportunities, either in other regions within the country or abroad, through regular and irregular channels. From 2009 to 2014, merely 459 810 legal migrants left Ethiopia.<sup>13</sup> Tigray region is among the most vulnerable regions of Ethiopia, sending irregular migrants in which the Eastern Tigray zone takes the lead.<sup>14</sup> According to the Mixed Migration Centre, annual emigration from Ethiopia is roughly half a million, and 60–70 percent of those emigrating are irregular migrants who use various land and sea routes and enlist the help of informal brokers and smugglers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> ILO & UNIDO 2017; RMMS 2014.

<sup>12</sup> WOLDEABRHA 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> GIRMAY 2015; SARA 2010.

<sup>15</sup> MIGRATION OUT OF POVERTY 2019.



The particular focus of this study is not on all aspects and types of international migration; instead, it only focuses on the causes and drivers of international irregular migration, which is described as “the movement of persons that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transiting and receiving countries”.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Methodology

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The researchers employed a qualitative research method with the belief that it provides the most appropriate way of investigating the what, why and how research questions using key informants’ interview, in-depth-interview of experts and leaders, focus group discussions and observations. It enables informants to express their ideas in their words freely. It also enables the researchers to have an in-depth understanding of the problem under study. Based on these justifications, an exploratory research design was employed in order to increase knowledge about why irregular out migration of youths is very high and why youths of the study area especially migrate irregularly to Saudi Arabia despite all the challenges facing them.

To conduct this study, a purposive sampling method was employed to select seven sample tabias/ kebele (small districts) of Atsibi Wonberta woreda of the Eastern Zone of Tigray Regional State (based on the number of irregular migrant size). The researchers employed purposive sampling because it enables them to select relevant, knowledgeable and experienced participants/informants.

For this research, both primary and secondary data sources were employed. To secure first-hand information, primary data has been collected using semi-structured and unstructured, closed, and open-ended interview questions. To this end, a combination of multiple data gathering instruments, such as face to face interviews with 28 key informants (14 returnees and 14 returnees’ families), 19 informed experts/and leaders of concerned institutions and 2 focus group discussions (FGD – leadership of civic associations, non-migrant youths, religion leaders, and influential community elders) and observations were used. While secondary data was collected from relevant literatures, including research publications, books, newspapers, journal articles, the internet, legal documents, policies, meetings, official reports, human rights conventions; and reports of the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

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<sup>16</sup> ILO 2011, p. 11.

The researchers employed two FGDs in the belief that they could provide information about the practices, drivers and impacts of irregular migration and their concern about the irregular migration of youths in the woreda. The two group discussions helped the researchers to capture at the community level, perceptions about irregular migration in the study of the woreda. Moreover, the study employed a qualitative approach for data interpretation and analysis by applying narrative and content analysis.

### **3. Irregular youth migration from Atsibi Wonberta Woreda to Saudi Arabia**

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#### **3.1 The underlying causes and drivers of Irregular Migration in Atsibi Wonberta**

The root causes and drivers of migration in Atsibi Wonberta generally are grouped into “push factors” (that drive people away from their home country) and “pull factors” (that attract people to migrate to another place). There are also other factors, such as enabling and immediate factors, that drive and facilitate migration.

#### **Push Factors**

Push factors include economic, political, socio-cultural, environmental factors and administrative, legal policy issues pertaining to sending countries/countries of origin.

##### *Economic and Environmental Factors*

Economic and environmental factors such as poverty, unemployment, drought, soil degradation, poor living conditions, inadequate working conditions and low labour costs are the major factors for economic migration from Atsibi Wonberta. Moreover, small sized farmland, low fertility of soil, the inability to access agricultural inputs to increase productivity, and lack of a sufficient irrigation scheme are other push factors for economic migration. In line with this, one returnee who participated in the study in February 2020 claims that many youths lack access to their own agricultural land and a place to construct a home. He further stated that, “*agricultural inefficiency and rural underemployment are key driving forces for irregular migration of rural youths in the study area.*” She further

stated that absence of land reforms, inequalities in land ownership and other productive assets, landlessness, weather-related shocks, limited non-agricultural jobs in rural areas, ecological degradation, decline in soil fertility, high costs of agricultural inputs and lower incomes from the agricultural sector are among the major factors that pushed them out.

Participants in the focus group discussions and parents also indicated that the area is frequently affected by drought and this has exacerbated food insecurity in the woreda. In this regard, one youth returnee who participated in the study said *“besides poverty, a lack of job opportunity is another factor that youths are pushing for in the study area. Because they said that in our woreda there is a lack of investment, infrastructure, construction and service providers such as hotels and tourism that can create new job opportunities.”*

These facts have been further strengthened by another returnee who participated in the study, as follows:

*“My interest was to improve the life of my parents, to make them very rich. Being the elder child for my mother, I decided to migrate irregularly since I have no parent to cover my expense in the regular [legal] way. I do not want my mother to be depressed, as I love her so much. What you earn there [Saudi Arabia] for a year is more than what you get in six or more years here. Therefore, in order to earn a better income and improve your life, you migrate. When I thought about my country, I have never seen any hope. You can gain nothing by working here. There are college and even university graduates with no employment. Moreover, even those employed did not improve their own and their family life. You cannot change and improve your life; you are always the same while being here.”*

Furthermore, returnee’ family who participated in the study area said:

*“Listen to me; do you think, a person leaving his village and his family, make him happy. No. My daughter was married and the mother of three children. Life was hard to her, she was unhappy with her marriage, and she left her three of her children to me and irregularly migrated to Saudi Arabia twice. First, she returned home empty handed and her husband abandoned her. Life became heavy like a rock to her and she lost taste of life. I have no means to help her, and when she has lost everything, she [has] been forced to flee to Saudi Arabia irregularly for the second time.”*

Thus, the responses of the participants about the economic push factors are consistent with the empirical evidence of economic disparities, poverty, income differentials and food insecurity. Hence, poverty, unemployment, a lack of farmland, a lack of good governance, the hope to find a better job in the destination country, poor living conditions, inadequate working conditions and losing hope in future job opportunities in the home country pushed them to migrate irregularly. The returnees further said that even the few employment opportunities in the informal sectors, such as construction and house cleaning could not support and improve their lives.

*Socio- cultural factors and practice of irregular migration in Atsibi Wonberta*

According to the views of the regional experts and leaders, who participated in the study area, the Tigray Regional State (particularly the Eastern and Southern Zones) is more affected than other parts of the country and irregular youth migration is growing in number and spreading to new areas such as the central and southeast zones of the region. One of the regional experts said

*“Migration started in this woreda since the 1970s and has a long history. At that time, many youths were moving via Eritrea, mainly to Yemen and Saudi Arabia, because of the war in Northern Ethiopia, the recurrent droughts, the settlement program, and due to national military service campaign. However, the recent irregular migration of young people is so high that the underlying causes are economic and the high ambition of the youth to change and improve their lives. We are constantly losing our working force. Death is knocking on every door. The local youth is convinced that irregular migration is the only way to change and improve their lives. Everybody is ready to go to Saudi Arabia. There is high competition among the youths in the study area. Because of this misconception, many young people are going through irregular migration as if it was a “silver box” or “coffin.”*

Moreover, one expert of the woreda indicated that

*“The one who migrates irregularly [is] considered as a hero in our area. The challenges of irregular migration could not stop them. Everybody is ready to go. It is like a competition. I am not lesser than the other. This is what the youth of the woreda think. This thinking has become dominant. Irregular migration is negatively affecting the community. On the contrary, no one condemns the problem rather it is much more encouraged by parents and the community and it*

*is becoming a major area of life for the local youth. The youth is highly influenced by the erroneous thinking that “a coffin or a coffin is dead”.*

During the focus group discussion, local leaders clearly show that irregular migration became common practices in the area since the 1970s and has now reached a point where death has become unbearable. They believe that irregular migration is becoming a “culture” and a common practice in the community of the study area. Some families did not condemn their children for thinking about migrating irregularly; rather, they encouraged and facilitated it by giving moral and financial support.

The empirical information from the respondents and the literature reviewed confirm the existence of social and cultural factors that contributed to the expansion and continuation of “circuit migration” such as the existence of a large number of illegal local brokers with networks extending to countries of destination; misinformation and false promises by brokers; and success stories of those who already migrated. Other factors, such as the influence of parents or friends who are in exile by facilitating irregular migration and providing information about salary, facilities, and job opportunities in the destination countries; family and peer pressure; and the involvement of returnees in recruiting potential migrants, especially girls, were also causing factors for cross-border outmigration. Correspondingly, many local youths consider outmigration as the only way to achieve a better standard of living. Hence, both in groups or by individual decision, youths often cross the land and sea to Saudi Arabia through Djibouti and Somalia.

The response of most informants about the role of diaspora social networks in the destination country (Saudi Arabia) in maintaining and facilitating migration outflows is consistent with the social network and migration theories. Since diasporas or networks within the place of destination (in this case, Saudi Arabia) play a key role in maintaining and facilitating migration flows instead of initiating the method.<sup>17</sup> As the size of the network (relatives, friends), potential migrants are more likely to receive better information and assistance in their job and house searches.<sup>18</sup> And this is actually happening in the study area because there are thousands of migrants in Saudi Arabia and this idea is compliment with the idea of migration causes migration. Nowadays migration is associated with moral, social status and financial success and encouraged by the community in the study area.

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<sup>17</sup> MASSEY. 1993.

<sup>18</sup> VERTOVEC 2002.

Most of the youths in the study area do not have a spirit of hope and have a tendency to work at home. Some experts/leaders, religious leaders and influential residents who participated in the focus group discussions said that currently, most of the local youth, instead of trying to change and improve their lives by working at home, are inspired to migrate and they see Saudi Arabia as an “Earthly Paradise”.

The desire to go away and be rich in the short term is very high in the study woreda. There is competition among youths and everybody is ready to go. This becomes dominant thinking in the Atsibi Wonberta Woreda. Due to the hopelessness of finding jobs at home, youths choose to migrate irregularly and consider it as the only means to change and improve their lives.

#### *Administrative and policy factors in Atsibi Wonberta*

In Atsibi Wonberta, the bureaucratic system of government failed to provide efficient and effective services to citizens in general and youths in particular. It is believed that, apart from a lack of good governance at all administrative levels, there is a lack of enough financial institutions that support the youth by providing loan/credit and work opportunities. In this regard, many returnees claim that the government in the study area is not supporting the young people. For instance, one young returnee said:

*“There are not enough rural and urban financial institutions to support youth; the leadership and the professionals do not support the youth well enough. Apart from lack of governance, such as discrimination, youths are not receiving enough loans to start a job. If you do not have a home map or a car ownership document, you will not receive a loan. Moreover, the interest rate for a loan is high for a young person who is a beginner. It is difficult to find a place to work in Atsibi Wonberta. Thus, these and other administrative factors discourage and drive local youths to migrate irregularly.”*

The country lacks a comprehensive immigration policy, in particular a separate irregular migration policy. Criminalization and detention of illegal brokers and human traffickers have neither stopped brokerage nor effectively addressed the challenge of irregular migration.

Rather, human trafficking and/irregular migration have continued in Ethiopia and the study area. Since brokerage is demand-driven, aspiring migrants look for brokers and ask them to facilitate their migration. In other words, as long as young

people are willing to migrate, and families and communities are ready to support their intention to leave, there will be a continuous demand for informal brokers.

The president of the court of the study woreda who participated in the research indicated the gaps in the adoption and enforcement of law regarding irregular migration as follows:

*“The currently amended Proclamation No. 909/2015 was insufficient to adequately defend and deter irregular migration. For example, a broker who has been caught trafficking is allowed to be released on bail. Not only under this limitation, but according to this proclamation, a police officer cannot ask for more time to search and organize evidence if the investigation is not completed within 4 months. Furthermore, a vehicle caught in trafficking is not criminalized according to this proclamation. It means that the illegal brokers /traffickers would be released without the punishment they deserved. This means that human traffickers will continue to reinforce trafficking. Given the legal gaps, there is still a wide gap in the level of implementation. In addition to this, parents and society either hide or negotiate with illegal brokers rather than expose them. These all are aggravating irregular migrations from time to time.”*

Atsibi Womberta woreda’s police chief confirmed that many parents negotiate with illegal brokers practically. He further said that many parents came to the police office to get their money back and asked the police department to help him. But, many of them did not have the exact names and addresses of the brokers.

### **Pull Factors**

Pulling factors such as stable employment prospects, better living conditions, higher employment opportunities and high salary/income attract young people for irregular migration. A young returnee who participated in the study responded to the question of what attracts her to migrate irregularly to Saudi Arabia as follows:

*“I was looking for a better income and a better life. Because in Saudi Arabia there are better living conditions, more job opportunities and higher income than in my woreda. For example, in Saudi Arabia, I earn more than ten times what I do here. Here, a laborer earns up to 150 birr per day, while a professional earns up to 500 birr per day. However, in Saudi Arabia a laborer earns about 1500 birr a day, while a professional earns up to 2000 birr a day. You can*



*imagine the income difference between here and Saudi Arabia; here, a laborer earns 2,600-3,900 birr in a month, while in Saudi Arabia earns up to 39,000 birr per month, the difference being more than 36,000 birr in a month. While a professional here, for example, a carpenter earns between 13,000 and 15,000 birr a month, while one in Saudi Arabia earns between 52,000 and 60,000 birr a month. So, the difference is visible; it is between 39,000 and 45,000 birr per month”.*

This response is consistent with the idea of economic disparities and income differences between the study area and the receiving country, i.e. Saudi Arabia, acting as one of the pull factors for irregular migration. Economic disparities between the sending areas (for example, the study area) and the receiving areas (for example Saudi Arabia) include differences in earnings, livelihoods and living standards. This empirical evidence is consistent with the responses of returnees, returnees’ parents and some experts about the economic causes of irregular youth migration in the study area. Because, there is a general agreement that economic factors are paramount in inducing people to migrate irregularly.

Income differentials between the origin and potential destination and income variability play important roles in driving migration.<sup>19</sup> A global analysis of the determinants of international migration flow between 1995 and 2015 suggests that a rise of 10 percent within the income differential between two countries increases the number of migrants between the two by 3.1 percent, on average.<sup>20</sup> This idea compliments the responses of most respondents. For instance, the returnees said that the income/salary they earn in Saudi Arabia is ten times greater than that in their home country.

The high demand for cheap unskilled labour in Middle Eastern countries (particularly in Saudi Arabia) is among the most important pull factors for migration. According to a study conducted by the IOM, for instance only Saudi Arabia demanded 750,000 –1.5 million domestic workers from 2010-2012.<sup>21</sup> Concerning irregular migrants the number of Ethiopian migrants who arrived in Yemen with their intended destination mostly Saudi Arabia was 43,000, 75,000 and 84,500 in 2010, 2011 and 2012 respectively.<sup>22</sup> The responses of most of the returnees strengthen the above-mentioned data.

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<sup>19</sup> LILEOR 2011.

<sup>20</sup> OECD 2016.

<sup>21</sup> IOM 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



*Expectations of migrants before migration*

The expectations of migrant youths before they leave their home country are quite different regarding job opportunities and life abroad, and the hardships of crossing the desert route and the journey in the sea. One returnee who participated in the study gave the following opinion about his expectations and his experience in the destination country:

*“I had been to Saudi Arabia irregularly three times. However, I have not made any progress or change in my life. I had high hopes before I went into exile. First, brokers told me that Saudi Arabia had better wages and a better standard of living. Due to this, I had arrived in Saudi Arabia irregularly, but the promise that I had been given and my desire to create wealth were beyond my reach.”*

Even though he believes that irregular migration is like gambling with one’s own life, he is still interested in going to Saudi Arabia for the fourth time. His reason was that *“life does not make sense to me here, I will try it for the fourth time, but I may die on the journey or in the destination country.”*

Hence, according to the responses of the returnees, youths move with high expectations of income, job opportunities and better life in the destination country. Due to their high expectations, most migrants are ready to face all challenges and hardships throughout their entire journey and destination country. They only think about how to escape poverty and unemployment so, as to improve their lives in a short time. Most irregular migrants want to engage in irregular migration, is a desire they want to have a better life. This is consistent with the causation and perpetuation theory<sup>23</sup> that emphasizes the high desire to create wealth overnight as the cause of migration. In relation to this, many irregular migrants believe that if they go irregularly, they can work illegal business/contraband activities and can create wealth within a short period of time and change their lives. This idea was strengthened by one returnee who said:

*“If you go legally, you are like a prisoner, you are like a modern slave; or, you cannot work for whatever you want. However, if you enter irregularly, you can work whatever you want and you can change and improve the lives of your family and yourself within a short period of time. Once you enter Saudi Arabia irregularly, you import from Yemen addictive substances such as hashish and alcohol such as whiskey and sell them in Saudi Arabia. You can also produce and*

<sup>23</sup> HAGEN – ZANKER 2008.

*sell homemade alcohol. But the risk is serious: it is like gambling with your life. If you get caught by the police or border keepers, you may face prison, gunshots or even death. That means death is always in your hands.”*

According to an expert in the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, who has similar view with another expert working in the Federal General Attorney and participated in the study said that youths migrate irregularly because the regular way of migration requires fulfilling various criteria, such as the completion of grade 8, learning the Arabic language, passing a medical exam and getting a COC assessment pass. So, young people do not want to go through this, as they have difficulty meeting these criteria.

### **3.2 Effects of irregular migration in Atsibi Wonberta woreda**

Migrants, particularly women and girls, are vulnerable to abuse by smugglers and traffickers. The vulnerability related to the risks of irregular migration, including but not limited to death, slavery, torture, forced labour, sex- and gender-based violence against women and girls, financial exploitation and so on, is increasingly becoming a crucial problem for Ethiopian migrants in general and the study area in particular.

Migrants are aware of the risks associated, but are willing to take them, indicating that they have nothing to lose. These empirical evidences were consistent with the responses of returnees who participated in the study. One returnee who participated in the study described the challenges faced and negative effects of irregular migration in his journey and in the destination country as follows:

*“Before we completed our journey, the smugglers/traffickers demanded us at least twice as much extra payment as we had agreed. If we failed to pay the required amount, they forced us to ask our families in Ethiopia to transfer them the required money. We were also victims of torture and harassment. They checked our pockets and took our money and mobile phones. On the journey, we suffered from thirst and hunger; some died in a crowded car or boat due to suffocation. When we sailed, they dropped some of us into the sea in order to lose weight on the boat, women/girls being raped and exposed to unwanted pregnancy and disease. After we arrived in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, women/girls were exposed to sexual exploitation; also they asked us to give them more money. Those who failed to pay the required amount of money were taken to an unknown place and subjected to*

*labour exploitation and xenophobia. They also handed us over to another person as a slave. Some migrants died from gunshots by security forces.”*

During the researchers’ observation, they have seen one returnee who faced gunshot in Saudi Arabia on his head and became paralyzed and his hands and legs are no longer functional. Moreover, one returnee’ parent who participated in the study described the effects of irregular migration as follows:

*“Illegal brokers and traffickers are harming our children. They often ask for additional money out of agreement for the trip. They call and threaten us. If we do not send them money, they will tell us that they will kill them. We are being forced to raise our grandchildren and this is causing economic pressure on us”. For example, one returnee’s mother said: “My daughter has three children and I have been forced to raise my three grandchildren. She returned empty-handed and because of this, it has been three years since her husband abandoned her. At this time, we parents are receiving many corpses, not a lot of money. We receive corpses without liver, kidney, or heart. We bought a deceased corpse for 400,000 birr because they will not give us the carcass if we do not pay the money.”*

Thus, irregular migration is a crime that is causing a variety of economic, social, cultural, political and psychological challenges and negative effects on victims, parents and the society at large. The primary challenge for most migrants is leaving their family, friends and community to an unknown community and the victims face injuries, torture, gunshots, death, disability, labour and economic exploitation, sexual abuse, health problems, or abduction of children and xenophobia. Other negative effects are the loss of productive manpower, various social crises such as marital break-up, childless parenting, and psychological trauma and the defamation of the national image.

### **3.3 Efforts and challenges to mitigate irregular migration in Atsibi Wonberta woreda**

Ethiopia has ratified major international laws and policies, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where the right to freedom of movement is enshrined, the UN Convention for the Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and Exploitation of Prostitution of Others. But, this is not practical on the ground because of multiple factors, such as national security problems. The Ethiopian government also cooperates with several international organizations to tackle

irregular migration, such as IOM, UNHCR, ILO, UNODC,<sup>24</sup> and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

Furthermore, some efforts have been made to create job opportunities for urban youths, including returnees. The government and other relevant non-governmental organizations are also trying to facilitate credit for the youth and they are involved in raising awareness about the severity of irregular migration. Anti-human smuggling and anti-trafficking task forces and sub-committees are also organized and established to prevent irregular migration from the woreda to the federal level. This task force is responsible for dealing with illegal brokers and traffickers. However, many returnees claim that the government of Ethiopia in general and the local government in particular are not providing coordinated support to youths including returnees. The leadership and experts' support is not sustainable, as they are not paying attention to the youth, and they lack commitment to mitigate the problem. It is also hard to start one's own business as there is a lack of start-up capital.

Moreover, many respondents believe that lack of leadership commitment, absence of an independent comprehensive migration policy and failure to coordinate the Task Force established to prevent irregular migration at all levels are major hindrances in preventing irregular migration. Moreover, the urban economy is unable to create sufficiently productive employment opportunities because of low-level private sector investment in the productive sectors of the economy, particularly in manufacturing and services for an increasingly educated urban youth.<sup>25</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

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Migration is always the result of complex and often-interrelated macro-, meso-, and micro-factors acting at the society and individual levels with intermediate enabling factors. The study revealed that the causes and drivers of irregular migration are complex and interrelated in terms of push, pull and enabling factors. The push factors are a mix of economic, social, cultural and environmental changes, administrative and individual values (such as desires and attitudinal enslavement). Poverty, lack of reliable and sustainable employment, poor living conditions, a lack of additional sources of income other than agriculture, low labour costs, drought, land degradation, a lack of farmland for youths, losing hope in future

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<sup>24</sup> UNODC 2011.

<sup>25</sup> UNDP 2015.

job opportunities in the home country and food insecurity are some of the main economic and environmental push factors.

Some of the socio-cultural factors that contribute to the expansion and generating of “chain irregular migration” in the study area include: long history of migration, common practices and “culture” of migration in the community, experiences, false promises of illegal brokers and human traffickers. Besides, the influence of social networks, returnees’ peer and family pressure, and high competition among youths become dominant, thinking of the local youth “coffin or coffin is dead”. Moreover, a lack of good governance at all administrative levels, a lack of enough financial institutions that support the youth, and a high interest rate on loans, lead the young people to frustration and hopelessness and thinking about irregular migration.

In addition, lack of comprehensive migration policy and inadequate legislation, weak law enforcement, a lack of effective judiciary on the informal sector and high desire of youths to make wealth overnight are considered to be among the political, administrative and individual values push factors aggravating irregular migration of youths in the study area. Economic disparities and income differences between the sending and the destination countries, such as stable and higher employment opportunities, better living conditions, a high salary in the destination country are acting as pull factors, and the influence of social networks/diaspora found in the destination country, act as common pull factors for irregular migration of youths in the study area.

The ratio of irregular migrants is also increasing as a spillover effect from those who are already irregularly migrated, as many as could communicate many from exile to home youths to be candidate for irregular migration. Here, the idea that migration causes migration is confirmed in the study area and more migrants create more links with relatives and friends in Saudi Arabia, making them candidates for migration, thereby generating “a chain of migration” and increasing the stock of irregular migration in the study area. Besides, economic motivation, especially a high desire to create wealth overnight and improve their lives by involving themselves in illegal activities i.e. contraband; limited access for legal migration; a high cost of fees charged by agencies; the involvement of smugglers or agents in the process; misconceptions and imagery of other migrants/returnees and a lack of competent organization to respond to the problem.

The primary challenges of irregular migration on victims are injuries, torture, gunshots, death, labour and economic exploitation, sexual abuse, health problems,

or abduction of children. It can be noted that psychological trauma is affecting victims in both travel and destination countries. Irregular migration is also a crime that causes the country to lose productive work forces, including deterioration of the values of education, social security and cohesion.

## 5. Recommendations

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In the study, it has been identified that poverty, backwardness and lack of job opportunities, economic disparities and income differences between the sending and receiving countries are among the root causes and drivers of irregular migration. Therefore, work that can reduce poverty, backwardness and lack of sustainable job opportunities and narrowing income differences between the sending and receiving countries should be timely and properly addressed.

To this end, the government and stakeholders should focus on activities that expand meaningful and sustainable job opportunities for the community, especially for the youth. To achieve this, paramount attention should be given to attract domestic and foreign investors. It is indispensable to expand and strengthen youth focused rural and urban savings and credit institutions, revise the existing upper limit of credit based on the current trends and reduce interest rates, especially for business-starting youths. Works should be done to save the culture of the community in general and youth in particular. Addressing the problems of good governance and service delivery at all administrative levels should not take a long time. The researchers believe that it is only when the leadership is firmly committed to the public that the prevention of irregular migration can be achieved and the leadership can actively engage the youth.

Policy makers need to develop and implement a comprehensive policy and strategy on irregular migration. This will help in addressing all the essential aspects of international migration within an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary response mechanism that enables coordinated efforts to mitigate the root causes and drivers of irregular migration.

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