

“I haven’t changed like I wanted to. Until then, I will stay here.”

Enabling Successful Migration for Young Rural-Urban Migrants in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF 

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Key Messages

- The relationship between land and migration is more complex than it appears. While migrants’ families often have land that is small in area or of poor quality, they rarely note land access as the most important reason for migration. Despite legal guarantees of equality, in practice women rarely inherit land, so it is irrelevant to their migration decisions. Men, on the other hand, are often uninterested in agriculture and instead aspire to “change their lives” by building livelihoods different from those of their parents.
- Gender is a key driver of different experiences among migrants. Female migrants have fewer social connections and often rely on older relatives or brokers for support upon their arrival in the city. Due to high living costs, women sometimes choose “full-time” jobs where they stay at their place of employment, while men are more likely to share small and cheap housing with peers or spend time living on the street.
- Some of the most important barriers to success in Addis Ababa include high costs of living and difficulty forming social connections, which inhibits access to guarantors and identification. Success is associated with strong social networks, social mobility, financial discipline, and the ability to save and invest in assets or businesses.
- Most respondents planned to remain in Addis Ababa, but there is still a fair number who plan to either return home or migrate abroad. Migration plans are often shaped by whether or not a migrant has succeeded in “changing their lives” in the way that they, their families, and communities expected.

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Many youths want to go home, but only after they have saved enough money to finish their education, build a house, or start a business. Often, youth find themselves failing to meet these goals and repeatedly postponing their return.

Research Overview

This paper summarizes findings from one of four studies on youth, migration, and resilience that emerged from a collaboration between Save the Children Federation, Inc. and the Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. This study focuses on young rural-urban migrants to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The other projects researched i) young men from rural areas working in the platform economy in Bengaluru, India; ii) young Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Kampala, Uganda; and iii) protected persons in Vienna, Austria who arrived as minors. The research team produced a synthesis report that discusses common themes and practical implications across all four contexts. In addition to these materials, the virtual repository (<https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/partnership-on-youth-migration-and-resilience/>) houses the full final capstone documents, the final presentations, and the data collection tools.

Research objective

This study focuses on the personal history, decision-making process, and aspirations of young Ethiopians who have migrated to Addis Ababa from rural areas of the country. To contribute to this knowledge base, this study explores the following key question: *How does the definition of success differ among Ethiopian youth who come to Addis Ababa with different ultimate intended destinations?* The idea is that success in Addis Ababa might look fundamentally different for those preparing to migrate to the Middle East compared to those hoping to build a long-term livelihood in the city or those individuals wishing to return to their village of origin.

Internal migration is common and rising in Ethiopia, yet its dynamics are not fully understood. Furthermore, there has been very little discussion on what success might mean for this population.

As of yet, very few organizations have served these internal rural-to-urban migrants, despite their high levels of vulnerability. This study helps establish the foundational knowledge necessary in order to design interventions that can build on the skills, knowledge, and personal characteristics that foster a more positive and fulfilling migration experience for youth. Finally, beyond the Ethiopian context, youth rural-urban migration is on the rise in many nations globally, and the lessons learned from this research may apply in similar contexts elsewhere in the world.

Background

Ethiopia has made major development gains in the past decade, with strong economic growth, significant improvements in education and health, and the election of a progressive new prime minister. However, one of the country's major challenges lies in addressing the needs of its rapidly growing youth population, with 70% of Ethiopians under the age of 30 and 50% under the age of 15.² The urban population is quickly growing, with the 19 million Ethiopians living in urban areas in 2018 expected to swell to 39 million by 2030.³ Many of these new urban dwellers will be youth, who often arrive in Addis Ababa with limited resources, connections, and skills but high expectations for the success that city life will bring them. Young Ethiopian job-seekers are involved in a complex web of migration patterns within the country as well as in the larger Horn of Africa.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, including 54 semi-structured interviews and a quantitative survey of 84 respondents conducted in Addis Ababa between June and August 2018. All migrants were selected using a purposive sampling approach with the following inclusion criteria: between the ages of 18 and 30 and arrived in Addis

² Assefa Admassie, Seid Nuru, and Shelley Megquier, "Harnessing the Demographic Dividend in Ethiopia," *Population Reference Bureau* (blog) (August 1, 2017), <https://www.prb.org/harnessing-the-demographic-dividend-in-ethiopia/>.

³ Zeru Fantaw Desta, Anne Bitga, and Jack Boyson, "USAID/Ethiopia Cross-Sectoral Youth Assessment Situational Analysis," (USAID YouthPower Learning, 2018).

Ababa within the past five years. With participants' consent, the research team recorded and transcribed all qualitative interviews to facilitate later analysis and coding. Qualitative analysis took place with NVivo. The survey data responses were recorded using Kobo Toolbox software on a tablet device and analyzed via STATA.

While this research has been able to draw out several interesting insights on the lives and livelihoods of youth migrants living in Addis Ababa, it remains an exploratory study and therefore subject to limitations. First and foremost, the sample size is small, particularly for the quantitative survey. Unfortunately, this meant that much of the quantitative analysis was limited to bivariate regressions. Nonetheless, these simple regressions reveal some important and interesting associations and are a foundation for further research. Furthermore, because this study used purposive sampling rather than a random sample from the total population of migrants, it is difficult to draw generalizable conclusions about migrant experiences. There are some populations extremely relevant to this study—such as sex workers and street youth—that were difficult to access, either ethically or logistically, so they were not included.

Key Findings

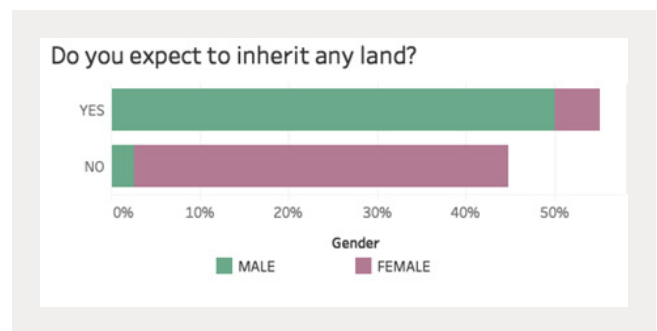
"One cannot be successful through farming:" Life at home

Most respondents came from large, poor farming families from throughout Amhara and Oromia Regions, and the Wolayita Zone of Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNP) in particular. There was a tendency for migrants to be one of the oldest children in their families, a position that often comes with a higher degree of responsibility. Beyond unpaid family labor, most youth had not engaged in any income-generating activities prior to coming to Addis Ababa. Most came from families with land,⁴ but 68% estimated that their land area was small, less than one hectare. Land quality was also an issue, as only 17% were able to say that their land was of good or excellent quality.

⁴ For simplicity of expression, I refer to families or individuals "having" land, though technically this means land usage rights rather than ownership in the Ethiopian context.

Furthermore, the data revealed that while 93% of respondents come from families with land, only 51% of all youth surveyed report that they expect to inherit any of that land. As shown in Figure 1, gender was a key and significant characteristic driving the discrepancy between land access and land inheritance: 89% of men in the sample expected to inherit land compared to only 10% of women. For the predominantly male group that does expect to receive land from their parents, an important question is whether or not they actually *want* to inherit land. The qualitative interviews revealed a degree of resistance towards the idea of inheriting, driven by a desire for independence, dislike of rural lifestyles, and preference for a non-agricultural livelihood. One 23-year-old man from Amhara declared proudly, "I want to win out and lead my own life. I do not need any house or land from my parents."

Figure 1. Expectation of land inheritance by gender, % total survey respondents.



Overall, more than one-third (38%) of survey respondents reported that their families had experienced an unexpected shock within the past five years. The most common shocks were drought, illness, and death of a family member. Several migrants also mentioned their parents' divorce and/or remarriage as a shock. In some cases, these challenges contributed directly to the decision to migrate.

"I came up with the idea that I would work hard and change my life:" Migration experience

The most important factors leading to a decision to migrate were "a desire to change their lives," an

inability to pursue education, a lack of opportunity, poverty, or a livelihood shock. Although land access is a structural force that shapes how youth are brought up and how they think about their future, it does not seem to be a major, immediate driver of youth's decisions to migrate to Addis Ababa. The same is true for early marriage, which might not play as great a role in recent migration to Addis Ababa as previously believed.

Young men and young women tend to have very different experiences in the immediate adjustment period. Upon arrival, young men are significantly more likely than women to already have friends from the village who had come to Addis Ababa before them. Women tend to have a significantly smaller social network upon arrival, on average 2.7 fewer links than men. Young women were more likely to depend on an older family member—often an elder sibling, aunt, or uncle—for support immediately upon arrival, rather than a friend or a sibling. Young women who arrive without connections often turn to employment brokers,⁵ who wait at bus stations to connect new arrivals with jobs. While brokers can sometimes be helpful in this crucial moment, as one young woman—who happened to be waiting in line for assistance from brokers—explained: “[When they] come looking for work, many women spend the night at the broker’s house and have bad things happen to them. It saddens me when I hear about this, even though I haven’t seen it firsthand.” The most common jobs among survey respondents were street vendors, daily laborers, shoe shiners, guards, waiters, and housemaids.

“I used to think there would be money on the ground here. But it’s not anything like that:” Managing life in Addis Ababa

Managing money is often a major challenge, particularly paying for high housing costs. Young men and women have different ways of coping with high living expenses. It is common for young men to share small and cheap housing with many other young men. Women, on the other hand, sometimes work “full time” jobs like housemaid, bartender, or waitress, in which the employer provides housing and meals. Despite challenges in managing finances,

most respondents (81%) are still able to save some amount of their income. Bank accounts are the most common way to save, and some youth—especially young men—participate in traditional rotating savings groups called *equbs*. The most common motivation for saving is to start a business.

Only 45% of respondents can send regular remittances to their families at home. Interestingly, in a few cases, the qualitative interviewees reported that their families at home are the ones to send support to them in Addis Ababa (16%). Migrants maintain ties to their families back home through regular communication. They do not, however, share all realities of life in the city. Many youth migrants reported intentionally protecting loved ones from hearing the more difficult details of their lives. (This omission can perpetuate the cycle of migration among other youth who only hear stories of success.) The most common shocks experienced in Addis include unemployment, illness, theft, loss of merchandise, and homelessness. Youth cope with these difficulties by relying on social networks, finding solace in their religion, depleting savings, skipping meals, and sometimes engaging in substance abuse.

Having an Addis Ababa ID or a guarantor can be very important for accessing services and government programs, as well as for pursuing onward international migration. To gain the trust of a potential employer, landlord, or government official, migrants are often asked to provide an assurance of someone whom the person already knows and trusts, known as a guarantor. Among respondents, 67% had guarantors. Identification, required for formal employment and accessing services, is a related but distinct issue. Youth migrants either have an ID from their home region (71%), a resident ID for Addis Ababa (24%), or in a few cases, no ID at all (8%). However, securing a guarantor—which is necessary to get an Addis ID—can be challenging for migrants. People in Addis Ababa are more wary of strangers than they might be in rural areas. As one respondent explained, “It is easy to meet and make friends, but I cannot trust people in Addis Ababa... Personally, I have to approach and know individuals

⁵ Brokers, or “*delala*,” facilitate both international and internal migration in Ethiopia, as well as providing broader services, including linking job-seekers with employers, obtaining work visas, and arbitrating employment disputes. The government has attempted to formalize the institution, creating “official” brokers, but there remain great—and probably much larger—numbers of unofficial brokers.

very intimately to call them my friend.” Building trust can be difficult due to discrimination, language barriers, and previous experiences of betrayal.

“Generally, I want to live here in Addis as long as my income is able to cover all my costs. Otherwise, I will go back to my village:” Migration plans

When comparing migration plans, interest in staying in Addis Ababa was the most common response, but a fair number of respondents in both the quantitative and qualitative sample plan to either return home or migrate abroad. As depicted in Table 1 below, there were certain characteristics that were more significantly associated with each intended destination than others.

Those who plan to **stay in the city** tend to fall into three categories: 1) those who have done well

and want to continue climbing the social ladder; 2) those who are unsatisfied with their level of success and want to avoid returning home empty-handed; and 3) those who reason that the negative conditions that caused them to migrate are still in place. Youth migrants **planning to return home** are often frustrated with high living costs in the city and romanticize the simplicity of their old life. This desire to return home is often conditional upon first finding a better job or saving up a certain amount of money. Often, youth find themselves failing to meet these goals and repeatedly adjusting their timeline to postpone their return. The sample also included a few youth who are interested in **international migration** to the Middle East, to countries such as Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. The main draw for these youth is the promise of higher salary, combined with pressure from friends and relatives,

Table 1. Characteristics associated with each migration plan

Desire to stay in Addis	Desire to return home	Desire to migrate abroad ⁶
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong social networks of mutual support in Addis Having an Addis ID Coming from a poorer family with small land Fewer siblings Non-Welaita ethnicity⁷ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welaita ethnicity Self-employed Many siblings Coming from families with > 1 hectare of land Having ID from home region Fewer close social connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female Reliance on just 1 or 2 social connections Difficult life experiences and livelihood shocks Low levels of trust Strong peer influence

Table 2. Characteristics significantly associated with perceived success and failure

Factors positively associated with success	Factors negatively associated with success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being female Higher savings Being one of the younger siblings in a family High social capital Coming from a wealthier family Higher trust in brokers Faith in religion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being older Experiencing discrimination in Addis Facing a livelihood shock in Addis Coming from a family with smaller land Expectation of inheriting land Those who speak regularly with families at home

⁶ Note: The sample of migrants with a preference for migrating abroad was very small. Therefore, these associations are not statistically significant and come primarily from qualitative data. Factors for the other two migration plans, however, are statistically significant.

⁷ The only ethnicity with a statistically significant association to a particular migration plan was the Welaita. Being Welaita is closely associated with a preference for returning home to the village rather than staying in Addis Ababa.

and the hope of using onward migration as a fast track to a better life and more aspirational work like owning a business.

Ideas about success and failure

We examined how successful youth consider themselves. This data showed similar characteristics among migrants at different levels of perceived success, as shown in Table 2 below, which enabled us to make hypotheses about the reasons behind these significant relationships.

Several surprising findings are worth noting. For example, female respondents consistently rated themselves as more successful than their male counterparts, despite the generally lower status of women in Ethiopia. One hypothesis is that perhaps the women who choose to migrate to Addis Ababa are a very selective group with a high degree of ambition, courage, and confidence. Another surprise was that those who are later in the birth order report higher success. Younger siblings might benefit from less pressure from parents and the advice of older siblings who have migrated. Higher trust in brokers also contributes to success, possibly because they can then rely on brokers' assistance in the event of job loss or in the process of moving up to a better job.

Among the factors negatively associated with success, there were also a few unexpected trends. Older migrants see themselves as less successful, showing a degree of disillusionment. Also interesting was the discovery that those who maintain close communication with their families and friends in their home villages perceive themselves as less successful. These close ties to home might mean that they are more likely to feel homesick and struggle to make new connections.

Implications

This study provides an analysis of the livelihoods, migration aspirations, and perspectives on success and failure of young urban migrants to Addis Ababa. The following implications from this research offer guidance to policymakers on ways to support youth in becoming more successful:

- Migration drivers are complex and often driven by an individual's desire for new life.

Hence, a focus on **land reform, agricultural development, and resilience in the face of covariate shocks and stresses** such as drought is *unlikely* to prevent or reduce youth migration flows, though such efforts may improve the quality of life in rural areas.

- Any initiative to support youth migrants in Addis Ababa must somehow address the complicated dynamics of **guarantors and IDs**. To implement a program incorporating youth migrants, stakeholders must be prepared to engage in some level of negotiation and advocacy work with local officials to work with this population.
- Youth seek job opportunities, which might necessitate skills trainings. However, respondents reported that sometimes, even with training, finding a job in an industry without a social link can be impossible. Therefore, any skills training should ensure that there is a **pipeline to employment**, potentially through apprenticeship programs or trade associations that build both social capital and technical and vocational skills. Jobs should also have a **potential for promotion**, as youth associate a "static life" with failure.
- Any **life skills training** could benefit from sessions on healthy relationships, financial management, the consequences of substance abuse, and developing a vision for the future. Many youths could also use support in learning **Amharic**.
- Youth in rural areas do not have the **information** to make fully informed decisions about their migration and are unlikely to receive an accurate picture from their social networks. Humanitarian actors could step in to help improve this information gap and break the cycle of unrealistic expectations and disappointment.
- The **social needs** of male and female migrants differ. Women could use more support in forming connections with their peers, while men might benefit from more mentorship opportunities with older adults.
- There is a great deal of potential in **brokers**. Though often distrusted and looked down

upon, they exert a great deal of influence over youth's decision-making and have powerful social networks. Stakeholders should engage brokers in a positive way, given their influence and reach.

- Migrants who are struggling in Addis Ababa often feel trapped, in that they are unable to return until they have achieved a certain degree of success. Policymakers should foster migration that is **less permanent and more flexible**, for example circular or seasonal migration, or secondary students who come for the summer to earn money for school fees.
- There is potential in *equbs*, **traditional informal rotating savings groups** that can help to bridge social divides as well as foster a commitment to savings, both of which contribute to migrants' idea of success.
- There might be a connection between a difficult life in Addis Ababa and an increased interest in **irregular migration abroad**. This could be a helpful point to emphasize when advocating for the inclusion of migrants in programming.
- **Access to credit** could help open the door for youth to return to school, get a driver's license, find the startup capital for their business idea, or build their families a house in the village. All of these bring youth closer to their own definition of success.

Areas For Further Study

An interesting area for further research would be an exploration of youth migration among youth from the Wolayita Zone of SNNP, which seems to have particularly high numbers of migrants. There is also an opportunity to more closely examine the system of brokers to better understand how their roles can be leveraged to improve youth livelihoods. Finally, it could be beneficial to collect data from youth who have migrated to Addis Ababa and then returned to their rural areas to understand how this migration decision was made and its connection to success or failure.

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