

# Migration and development in Ethiopia: Exploring the mechanisms behind an emerging mobility transition

Kerilyn Schewel \*<sup>†</sup> and Legass Bahir Asmamaw<sup>‡</sup>

<sup>†</sup>Duke Center for International Development, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA, <sup>‡</sup>Department of Geography & Environmental Studies, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

\*Corresponding author. Email: kerilyn.schewel@duke.edu

## Abstract

This article examines the impact of Ethiopia's historical development on the nature, volume, and direction of internal and international migration. We describe three important trends associated with an emerging 'mobility transition': the *sedentarization* of nomadic and semi-nomadic populations; the *urbanization* of internal migration trajectories; and the *diversification* of international migration. Within these overarching trends, we discuss periods of political conflict, resettlement, and famine that led to significant internal and international displacement. We then explore the drivers of these mobility shifts, evaluating the relative influence of various political, economic, cultural, and technological developments on migration patterns over time. Our analyses distinguish between the deep drivers of an emerging mobility transition (e.g. nation-state formation, rising educational attainment, infrastructure development, and industrialization) and the drivers of displacement (e.g. political conflict or resettlement programs) that can suddenly affect the movements of large population segments. This detailed case study contributes to a growing body of research on the 'mobility transition' by revealing how a society's entire mobility complex changes—not only levels of international migration—as the social transformations associated with modern-day development proceed.

**Keywords:** migration, development, Ethiopia, social transformation, mobility transition

## 1. Introduction

Academic and policy-oriented research on the drivers of international migration from low-income countries often emphasize push factors, such as political conflict, climate change, or the poverty that magnifies disparities in wages and well-being between origin

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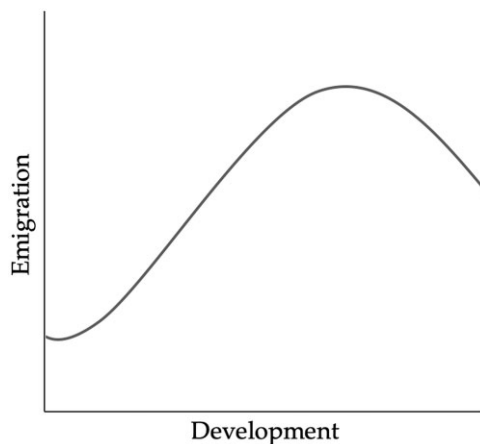
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and destination areas. Rich countries accordingly allocate billions in development aid each year with the hope of diminishing migration's root causes (Bermeo and Leblang 2015; Clemens and Postel 2018; European Commission 2020). Yet, recent empirical research from across the social sciences reveals a disruptively countervailing trend: emigration levels appear to *rise* as human development indicators increase and countries move from low- to middle-income status (Massey 1988; Skeldon 1997; de Haas 2007, 2010; Clemens 2014, 2020; Dao et al. 2018). The implication is that development, rather than alleviating the root causes of migration, is a root cause of migration.

Researchers increasingly theorize this relationship between migration and development through the lens of a 'migration' or 'mobility transition'.<sup>1</sup> Geographer Wilbur Zelinsky (1971) first posited the hypothesis of the mobility transition with his claim that 'there are definite, patterned regularities in the growth of personal mobility through space-time during recent history, and these regularities comprise an essential component of the modernization process' (Zelinsky 1971: 221–222). In contrast to prevalent perspectives that portray migration and development as substitutes for one another (see de Haas 2007 for a review), mobility transition theory suggests that patterns of mobility shift systematically as 'development' or 'modernization' proceeds. Zelinsky originally theorized how a range of mobility types change (e.g. rural–urban, urban–urban, international, frontier, and circulation), but recent migration research focuses almost exclusively on one kind: international migration. Researchers have uncovered an inverted U-shaped relationship between levels of international migration and development using cross-sectional data (Fig. 1), a relationship that today represents 'an uncommon instance of strong agreement among the various social science disciplines that have considered migration and development' (Clemens 2020: 45). This pattern appears to hold using measures of human development as well, not only economic (de Haas 2010).



**Figure 1.** Stylized depiction of 'inverted-U' shaped relationship between levels of development and emigration.

Many questions still remain about the mobility transition, however. At the macro level, what causes significant variation in how countries proceed through a mobility transition? At the micro-level, why, as poorer places develop, do more people decide to emigrate? As [Dao et al. \(2018: 100\)](#) explain, ‘Neo-classical explanations have been unable to explain the upward segment of the curve wherein migration increases with development at origin for countries at low or intermediate levels of income per capita. The existence of this upward sloping segment of the curve has therefore constituted a decades-old puzzle. . .’ While they and others advance important global analyses into this puzzle (see also [Vogler and Rotte 2000](#); [de Haas 2010](#); [Clemens 2014, 2020](#); [Clemens and Postel 2018](#)), more detailed country case studies are needed to clarify the mechanisms behind the mobility transition and its variations across time and space.

To contribute to this increasingly sophisticated body of research on the mobility transition, this article asks how development processes reshaped migration patterns in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is classified by the United Nations as one of the ‘least developed countries’. Development indicators have nevertheless increased significantly over the last 2 decades. Between 2000 and 2019, Ethiopia’s Human Development Index rose from 0.292 to 0.485, and per capita gross domestic product (GDP) rose from \$197.43 to \$602.53 (constant 2010 USD) ([WDI 2020](#)). Over the same period, volumes of international migration commensurately grew. Total migrant stock figures, subtracting refugees and asylum seekers, increased from 364,944 in 2000 to 641,528 in 2019 ([UN 2019](#)), and these figures miss significant irregular migration to the Middle East, East, and South Africa (see [Kuschminder, Andersson and Siegel 2012](#); [Kefale and Mohammed 2015](#); [Demissie 2018](#)).<sup>2</sup> Seen from this angle, the Ethiopia case study provides a compelling opportunity to explore the drivers of rising international migration in a country that, because it is experiencing relatively rapid development processes, appears to be on the initial, upward sloping segment of the mobility transition curve.

To better understand the characteristics and drivers of an emerging mobility transition in Ethiopia, we depart from recent research in three important ways. First, we ask how a wide range of mobility types have changed in addition to international migration trends. More specifically, we explore shifts in the geographic orientation, volume, and composition of mobility patterns, including forced to voluntary, and seasonal, rural–rural, rural–urban, urban–urban, and international.<sup>3</sup> Building on the earlier work of [Zelinsky \(1971\)](#) and [Skeldon \(1990\)](#), this enables us to examine how Ethiopia’s entire mobility complex has shifted over time, not only movements across its borders. Second, we apply a social transformation perspective to disentangle how different dimensions of social change reshaped migration and settlement trends in Ethiopia over time (see [Castles 2010](#); [Castles et al. 2015](#); [de Haas et al. 2020](#)). The term ‘social transformation’ is less normative than the term ‘development’<sup>4</sup> and has wider conceptual breadth. Explaining the mobility transition, as [Skeldon \(2012: 160\)](#) argues, requires looking beyond its correlation with measures of economic or even human development toward a wider range of political, cultural, and policy variables. Toward this end, we examine the mobility consequences of the political, economic, technological, and cultural shifts associated with the consolidation of a modern national state and its economic industrialization and diversification ([de Haas et al. 2020](#)). Third, we contextualize recent migration trends within a historical analysis covering the last century, with a particular focus on the period from the 1960s to 2010s

when more national-level data are available.<sup>5</sup> Our primary research question is: *How have processes of social transformation shaped patterns of internal and international migration within and from Ethiopia?*

The article proceeds into two parts. First, we briefly review how patterns of migration within and from Ethiopia changed over the last century. We identify three important trends associated with an emerging mobility transition: the *sedentarization* of nomadic and semi-nomadic mobility; the *urbanization* of internal migration trajectories; and the *diversification* of international migration. Within these overarching trends, we also discuss periods of state-driven resettlement, famine, or political conflict that led to significant internal and international displacement. In Section 2, we explore the drivers of these mobility shifts, evaluating the relative influence of different political, economic, and cultural dimensions of social transformation on migration trends over time. Our findings reveal the importance of distinguishing between the deep drivers of a mobility transition—which include national state formation, the expansion of formal education, economic industrialization, and infrastructure development—and the drivers of displacement (e.g. political conflict or resettlement programs) that can suddenly affect the movements of large segments of the population. Our findings support the claim that a mobility transition is inherent within the logic of modern-day development processes, yet show how different political and economic conditions affect the pace, timing, and nature of this transition.

## 2. Migration trends

The last century was a period of rapid social change in Ethiopia. Emperor Menelik first embarked upon a deliberate effort to ‘modernize’ the country during the last decades of his reign in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Pankhurst 2001). Tafari Makonnen eventually succeeded Menelik, becoming Emperor Haile Selassie, with equally lofty visions of building a modern Ethiopian state. Sidelined by a partial occupation by Italy from 1936 to 1941, Emperor Haile Selassie returned and ruled for several decades thereafter. In the second half of the 20th century and early 21st, where we concentrate our analyses, three political regimes pursued three very different visions of development: an imperialist regime under Haile Selassie until 1974, the communist Derg regime from 1974 to 1991, and a self-titled ‘developmental state’ from 1991 onwards. The following reviews how mobility patterns changed over this period; Section 3, then asks how the differentiated pursuit of development by these three regimes contributed to these mobility shifts.

### 2.1 The sedentarization of traditional forms of mobility

The structural configuration of Ethiopia’s landscape, particularly a dualism between its wet highlands and dry lowlands, explains a large degree of historical differentiation in the livelihoods of Ethiopia’s diverse peoples (Trimingham 1951; Prunier and Ficquet 2015: 4) (Fig. 2). In the first half of the 20th century, cultivation was common in the central and northern highlands, among the Agew, Amhara, and Tigrean peoples, as well as in the well-watered highlands of the South, where the Gurage, Sidama, and Omo tribes practiced

ensete and other cereal grain cultivation. Nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralism and agro-pastoralism characterized the livelihoods of peoples living in the more arid and semi-arid lowlands: the Afar, Saho, and Somali in the east, the Oromo across the south, the Nuer in the West (Levine 2000). Some populations resist categorization within this neat dualism, of course. The Harari peoples, for example, were the only group to have developed an early agricultural and trading tradition concentrating on a single large urban center (Levine 2000: 38). Similarly, the Oromo, because of a long history of expansion, conquest, and adaptation, are the most widely dispersed peoples in Ethiopia and also the most diverse in livelihoods, religion, and lifestyles.

Given the historical prominence of nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples across Ethiopia's vast lowlands, to examine changing migration patterns requires looking beyond the typical definition of migration as a residential move across an administrative boundary. Many people were not registered to residences, but were nevertheless highly mobile. Because Ethiopian censuses often excluded nomadic or pastoralist areas,



Figure 2. Ethiopia and its terrain.

quantifying the prevalence of nomadic lifestyles at the national level is difficult.<sup>6</sup> One study from 2000 estimated some 7,776,000 people (12 per cent of the total population) were pastoralists, concentrating primarily in the Somali and Oromia states (*Kilil Planning Bureaux 2000* as cited in [Markakis 2011: 28](#)). The last national census in 2007 made a greater effort to include pastoral peoples ([Randall 2015](#)). By that time, pastoralists numbered just 2.3 million (3.1 per cent of the national population; *CSA 2010*).

A range of more qualitative work on nomadic and semi-nomadic populations confirm a widespread decline in nomadic lifestyles over the last century, particularly since the 1970s—from the Dasenech peoples who lived along the Omo River in Southern Ethiopia ([Carr 1977](#)) to the Somali pastoralists in the East ([Devereux 2006](#)) to the Afar peoples of the Northeastern drylands ([Rettberg 2010](#); see also [Lautze et al. 2006](#); [Hagmann and Mulugeta 2008](#); [Piguet and Pankhurst 2019](#)). These studies show how the rise of the modern Ethiopian state disrupted the traditional political and economic systems of pastoral or agro-pastoral communities. While many participated in barter economies well into the mid-20th century, today, a growing number engage in cash markets and wage labor, the latter often encouraging settlement ([Piguet and Pankhurst 2009](#); [Schewel 2019](#)). Land seizure for development projects across Ethiopia further undermined nomadic practices, even as growing participation in formal schooling diminished aspirations for (agro-)pastoral lifestyles ([Maurus 2016](#)). For these and other reasons explored further in Section 3, Ethiopia's development over the last century entailed the settlement of populations that had historically been highly mobile.

## 2.2 The urbanization of internal mobility

Alongside this process of sedentarization, Ethiopia experienced slow but steady urbanization. Urban growth was historically concentrated in Addis Ababa, the capital city, first settled by Emperor Menelik and Queen Taytu in 1886. By 1910, the population was estimated to have 70,000 permanent and 30,000–50,000 temporary inhabitants ([Pankhurst 2001: 195](#)). The combination of settlement and growing population density allowed for infrastructure development and labor specialization unprecedented in other areas of the empire. By 1960s, Addis Ababa had grown to 644,190 residents, one-third (33.4 per cent) of the total urban population in Ethiopia at that time ([CSO 1968](#)). As small and medium-sized towns proliferated across Ethiopia in the subsequent decades (see [Table 1](#)), the proportion of the urban population living in the capital city decreased—to 28.5 per cent in 1994 and 23.6 per cent in 2007—yet still remains substantial. A growing share of Ethiopia's urban population now live in larger cities outside Addis Ababa, while one-fourth (24.9 per cent) live in towns of 10,000 or less. While almost all regions of Ethiopia saw a growing share of their population living in urban areas in recent decades, some regions, like Gambella, Afar, or Tigray, experienced faster urban population growth than others (see [Appendix Table A1](#)).

Ethiopia's urbanization is due in part to natural increases in the urban population and the reclassification of rural areas into urban ones as urban centers expand. However, a significant share of urban growth also stems from rural–urban migration. Historically, rural–rural movements were the most common type of internal migration occurring over the last century—whether for land, employment, or marriage. Since the 2000s, however,

**Table 1.** Charting urban growth in Ethiopia by town- and city-size

Population size of urban centers	Number of urban centers by town- and city-size			Proportion of the urban population by town- and city-size (%)		
	1967	1984	2007	1967	1984	2007
2,000–5,000	101	186	357	16.51	13.23	10.45
5,000–10,000	36	75	245	12.92	11.79	14.45
10,000–20,000	15	38	115	10.55	11.88	13.44
20,000–50,000	8	14	61	13.97	9.36	15.86
50,000–100,000	1	10	14	2.93	15.05	8.73
100,000–500,000	1	1	10	9.20	6.31	13.47
500,000–1,000,000	1	0	0	33.93	/	/
1,000,000+	0	1	1	/	32.37	23.60
<b>Total</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>325</b>	<b>803</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Total urban population</b>				<b>1,917,160</b>	<b>4,364,140</b>	<b>10,769,022</b>

Source: Rafiq and Hailemariam (1987) for 1967 and 1984; CSA (2010) for 2007.

internal migration trajectories have been increasingly directed toward towns and cities. One longitudinal study of 20 rural communities across Ethiopia found that rural out-migration significantly expanded in scope and complexity between 1995 and 2013 (Pankhurst et al., 2018). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, seasonal and agricultural migration by men was the dominant form of out-migration, but by the 2010s, new forms of ‘industrial migration’ to urban areas and international labor migration to the Gulf States, Sudan, and South Africa began to increase. Migrants were increasingly younger, and women comprised a growing share (Dom 2018). Similarly, Schewel and Fransen (2018), using Labor Force Survey data on internal migration rates across zones in Ethiopia, find that only recently did rural-to-urban migration replace migration between rural areas as the most common migration trajectory for both male and female internal migrants (see Table 2).

In addition to voluntary internal migration, internal displacement has a long history in Ethiopia, exacerbated by political violence and ethnic conflict, drought and famine, and relocation programs (see Yigzaw and Abitew 2019). State-led resettlement schemes have been a regular and contentious strategy of several Ethiopian regimes, often justified as a response to drought and famine, land degradation, or high population density. The circumstances and consequences of these resettlement projects are discussed further in Section 3.2, but to give a sense of the scale, over one million people were resettled in Ethiopia over two phases: some 600,000 individuals (200,000 households) in 1985–6 under the communist regime, and around 627,000 people (190,000 households) between 2003 and 2007 under the current government (Pankhurst 2009; Piguet and Pankhurst 2009).

**Table 2.** Internal migration patterns (%) by gender: 1999, 2005, and 2013

Migration patterns of recent migrants	1999			2005			2013		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Rural to rural	31.19	39.14	35.62	35.70	41.97	38.94	24.08	22.32	23.16
Rural to urban	21.79	21.58	21.67	27.60	23.91	25.69	29.42	37.26	33.52
Urban to rural	21.65	13.08	16.87	16.02	11.09	13.47	23.15	14.79	18.78
Urban to urban	24.37	25.56	25.04	17.78	20.43	19.15	23.35	25.63	24.54
Total migration	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

*Notes.* Based on Labour Force Survey data. Recent migrants are individuals who moved across zones less than five years prior to survey data collection. Based on the population aged  $\geq 15$  years.

*Source.* Adapted from [Schewel and Franssen \(2018\)](#), p. 585.



### 2.3 The diversification of international migration

Most accounts of early international migration from Ethiopia describe migration as the purview of the elite, who left during Emperor Haile Selassie's reign to pursue tertiary education in Western countries and then returned to government positions (Levine 1965; Terrazas 2007; Mergo 2016). Table 3, however, reveals significant regional migration prior to the communist revolution in 1974, to Djibouti, Sudan, Kenya, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, for example, which then accelerated under the Derg period. Because it is based on census and population register data, the figures cited in Table 3 likely underestimate the extent of international movement occurring over the period. Yet, it highlights the already diverse and regional destinations of international migrants during the time of the imperial and communist regimes.

After the overthrow of Haile Selassie and the rise of the military Derg regime in 1974, another form of migration became far more prevalent: the movement of refugees fleeing political persecution, civil strife, and famine (Fig. 3). The Derg formally closed Ethiopia's borders soon after seizing power, yet international movement significantly grew during this period. Refugee movements peaked in 1980, reaching over 2.5 million at the time. The Ethiopian diaspora consolidated in countries like the USA, many being educated elites with some connection to the imperial regime. Most of those who left Ethiopia during the Derg period, however, did not have the resources to move overseas. By 1990, at the end of the Derg era, UN Population Division data notes 942,295 Ethiopians were living in Sudan, 460,000 in Somalia, 26,695 in Kenya, 13,405 in Djibouti, and 1,284 in Eritrea (UN 2019). Most displaced Ethiopians stayed within the region; only a relatively small proportion were resettled in the USA or Europe once registered in refugee camps (Terrazas 2007).

After the fall of the Derg government in 1991, refugee movements subsided, and other forms of international migration became more common (Fig. 3). Figure 4 shows the growing diversity of destinations from the 1990s onward. Over this period, Ethiopians continued to flee political conflict, reunite with family, or seek educational opportunities abroad; in addition, the emigration of high- and low-skilled workers to destinations across Africa, Europe, North America, and the Middle East is increasingly common.

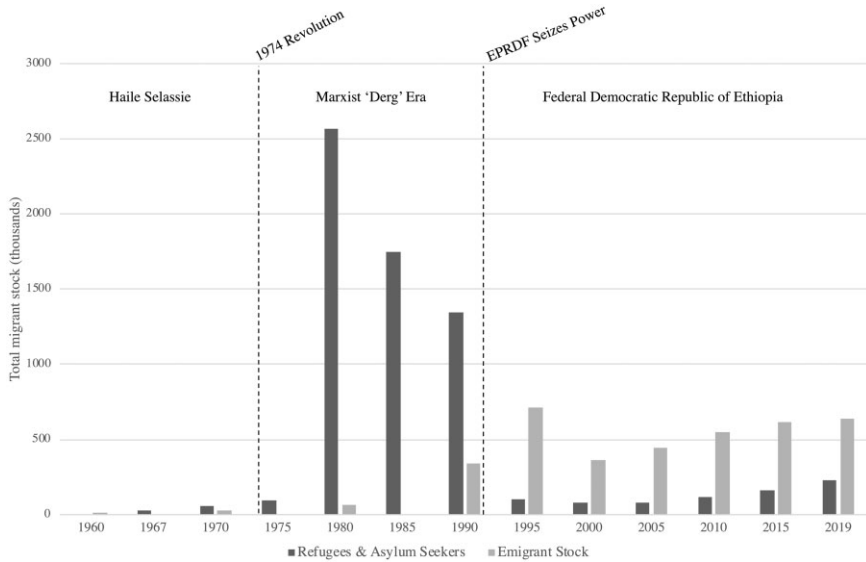
The USA remains the top destination of Ethiopian emigrants, and the introduction of the Diversity Visa contributed to the diversification of the Ethiopian diaspora there. Beginning in 1995, the Diversity Visa offers 55,000 immigrant visas through an annual lottery. While visa applicants come from more advantaged backgrounds than non-migrants (Mergo 2016), it introduced the possibility to emigrate overseas to individuals from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Ethiopia's emigrant population in the USA grew from 66,688 in 1995 to 273,980 in 2019 (UN 2019).

The labor migration of women and men to the Middle East, through both regular and irregular channels, also grew significantly since the 1990s. Official numbers provided by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs chart an increase in the number of female migrants leaving for Middle Eastern countries from 1,202 in 1999 to 187,939 in 2011–2 (Fernandez 2011; Kefale and Mohammed 2015). Irregular migration is estimated to be at least double that figure (Carter and Rohwerder 2016; Demissie 2018). In one study across five regions of Ethiopia, Kuschminder and Siegel (2014) found that half of all emigrants

Table 3. Top 10 destinations of Ethiopian emigrants by decade (N)

	1970		1980		1990		2000		
Djibouti	3,442	Djibouti	6,273	Djibouti	12,632	USA	34,983	USA	71,578
Israel	2,736	Kenya	4,634	USA	10,583	Israel	30,337	Israel	66,967
Sudan	1,738	Canada	3,671	Saudi Arabia	7,513	Djibouti	19,811	Djibouti	25,437
USA	1,415	Israel	3,251	Canada	6,828	Saudi Arabia	19,573	Saudi Arabia	21,174
Kenya	871	USA	2,847	Kenya	6,026	Germany	9,555	Kenya	20,332
France	661	Sudan	1,658	Italy	5,820	Kenya	7,493	Canada	14,075
Canada	651	France	1,583	Israel	4,389	Sweden	7,464	UK	11,796
Yemen, Rep.	444	Saudi Arabia	1,473	Sudan	2,126	Italy	6,783	Sweden	11,776
Zimbabwe	268	Netherlands	565	Netherlands	1,563	Netherlands	4,504	Netherlands	7,455
Saudi Arabia	262	Yemen, Rep.	549	Sweden	1,426	Sudan	2,978	Italy	5,587
Total Emigration	14,605		31,408		66,628		158,492		291,249

Source: Global Bilateral Migration Database, World Bank Group and Özden et al. (2011).



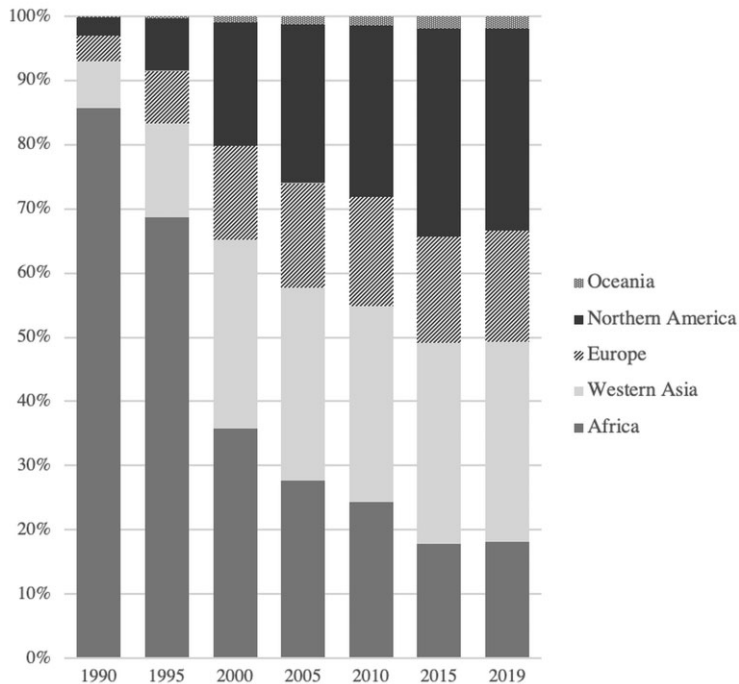
**Figure 3.** Migration trends by political regime.

Sources: Refugee and asylum seeker figures from [UNHCR \(2021\)](#); Migrant stock data for 1960, 1970, 1980 from the Global Bilateral Migration Database ([Özden et al., 2011](#)); Migrant stock data for 1990–2019 from [UN \(2019\)](#).

Notes: Emigrant stock data from 1990 onward are total migrant stock (at mid-year) data from UN (2019) subtracting refugee and asylum seekers. Data on asylum seekers unavailable prior to 2000.

were in the Middle East, compared to 20 per cent in Africa and 22 per cent in North America or Europe. Sixty per cent of these migrants were women. A strong demand for domestic workers in Gulf countries has contributed to this ‘feminization’ of Ethiopian labor emigration ([de Regt 2010](#); [Fernandez 2011](#); [Schewel 2021](#)).

Migration systems to the Middle East have a long history, initially emerging for religious and trade purposes (see [Pankhurst 2001](#)). One notable example is the movement of Jewish Ethiopians (Beta Israel) to Israel, beginning as early as 1935. This movement increased after the newly created Israeli state offered citizenship to Jews through the Law of Return in 1950. According to Israel’s Central Statistical Bureau, there were some 125,500 citizens of Ethiopian descent living in Israel in 2011. Furthermore, Muslims comprise over one-third of the Ethiopian population (CSA 2010), and movement between Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage has been ongoing for centuries ([Tibebu 2018](#)). These religious connections mirror economic ones; trade between Ethiopia and the Arabian Peninsula has an equally long history (see [Pankhurst 1965, 2001](#)). Still, despite these long-standing connections, the *nature* of movements within this migration system has transformed over time, such that most contemporary movement between Ethiopia and the Middle East today is labor migration, that is, migration for the purpose of wage-based employment.



**Figure 4.** Regional destinations of Ethiopian emigrants, 1990–2019.

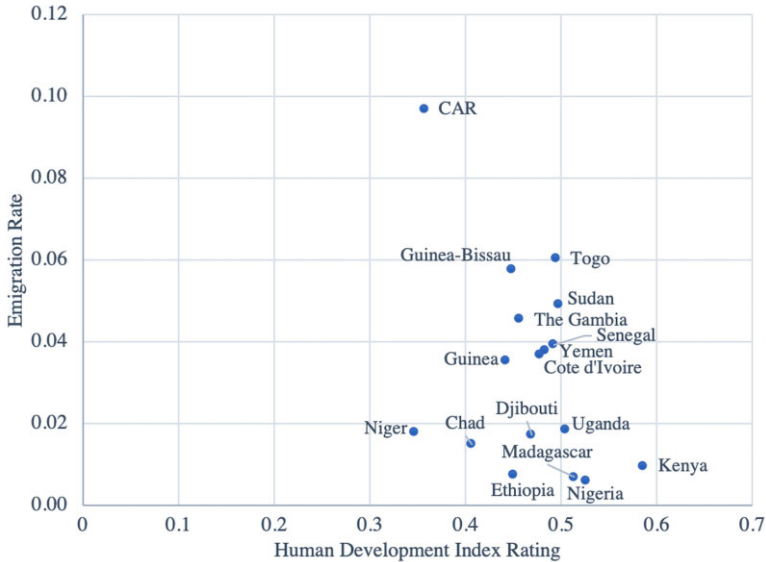
Source: UN (2019).

Note: These data include refugee figures.

Finally, despite a rising trend in international labor migration, Ethiopia appears to show lower rates of international migration than other countries at similar levels of human development (Fig. 5). As of 2019, estimates of Ethiopia's emigrant population remained less than one per cent (0.8) of the total population (UN 2019). Nevertheless, researchers note growing aspirations to migrate among young Ethiopians across the country (see Mains 2013; Schewel and Fransen 2018). According to Gallup World Poll data from 2013, 30 per cent of Ethiopians would move permanently to another country if given the opportunity, and that figure rises to 42 per cent for young people between the ages of 15 and 25 years.

### 3. Applying a social transformation perspective

This section applies a social transformation perspective to disentangle how different dimensions of social change shaped migration and settlement trends in Ethiopia over time (see Castles 2010; de Haas et al. 2020). Here, we define social transformation as a fundamental change in the way societies are organized and resources are distributed, and



**Figure 5.** Emigration rate by Human Development Ranking in 2015. Sources: HDI data from UNDP (2020); Emigrant Stock data from UN 2015.

Notes: Emigrant rates calculated as emigrant stock divided by the total population.

recognize several interconnected dimensions that constitute the ‘social’, including the political, economic, technological, demographic, and cultural (de Haas et al. 2020: 5). Ethiopia’s rich history arguably deserves a far lengthier treatment than we are able to accomplish within the confines of a journal article. Nevertheless, this section consolidates a wide range of interdisciplinary research to illuminate important interlinkages between various processes of social transformation and changing migration and mobility trends, which we hope future research will further refine and expand.

Table 4 shows several key indicators of social transformation in Ethiopia. Population growth, rising life expectancies and declining fertility rates suggest that Ethiopia is experiencing a demographic transition. Indeed, as mortality rates declined and fertility rates followed more slowly over the last three decades, a larger share of Ethiopia’s population are now young adults (CSA 2010; Donnenfeld et al. 2017). This demographic shift—the growing proportion of the population between 15 and 29 years—is often referred to as a ‘youth bulge’. It is commonly assumed that a youth bulge drives migration, yet just as there are many pathways through the demographic transition (i.e. different patterns of mortality and fertility decline across contexts), so too are there different pathways through a mobility transition (see Skeldon 2012: 155). This suggests the need to examine how other forces of social change interact with these demographic shifts. In this light, Table 4 shows that economic development fluctuated at low levels from 1980 to 2000, before experiencing rapid growth from 2010 onward. At the same time, an education transition brought rapid growth in primary school enrollment from 2000 onward, and a

**Table 4.** Indicators of social transformation in Ethiopia

Indicator	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2015
Population (millions)	22.2	28.4	35.3	48.1	66.5	87.7	99.9
Fertility Rate (births per woman)	6.9	7.0	7.3	7.2	6.5	5.0	4.3
Infant Mortality Rate (per 1,000 live births)	–	143.4	141.2	120.2	88.2	55.3	44.2
Life expectancy at birth (years)	38.4	42.9	43.7	47.1	51.9	61.6	65.0
Urban population (% of total)	6.4	8.6	10.4	12.6	14.7	17.3	19.4
Gross Domestic Product <sup>a</sup> (billions)	–	–	7.3 <sup>b</sup>	12.2	8.2	30.0	64.5
Primary school enrollment (% gross)	–	15.0 <sup>c</sup>	33.8	35.1	54.4	91.8	101.9
Tertiary school enrollment (% gross)	–	–	0.5	0.9	1.2	7.5	8.1 <sup>d</sup>
Air Transport (passengers carried, thousands)	–	231.0	242.9	620.3	944.6	3347.0	7074.8

Source: World Development Indicators 2019.

<sup>a</sup>GDP in current US\$

<sup>b</sup>data for year 1981

<sup>c</sup>data for year 1971

<sup>d</sup>data for 2014.

growing share of the population began to live in urban areas. The following sections consider the influence of these and other social changes on migration patterns within and from Ethiopia.

### 3.1 Regime change and political conflict

The 20th century was a period of political upheaval in Ethiopia. After the brief Italian occupation in the 1930s, three very different Ethiopian states sought to realize their own vision for Ethiopia's modernization. Mirroring the country's geographic position, Ethiopia's rulers carefully balanced the influence, advice, and assistance of Eastern and Western powers with a steadfast defensiveness of their own sovereignty. The Imperial regime under Haile Selassie first looked to Japan as a model. Japan drew on the economic and technological advancements of the modern West while maintaining its sovereignty, tradition, and the authority of an all-powerful and sacred Emperor. The emperor's downfall came in 1974, the year Prunier and Ficquet call 'the year of destiny, the year when Ethiopia was suddenly thrown into the modern world' (2015: 1). All

semblance of continuity with Ethiopia's mythic, religious past, which Haile Selassie had sought to balance alongside his modernization pursuits, disappeared as a military regime, the 'Derg', seized control and imposed an altogether different vision of modernity. The model of modernity that inspired the 1974 revolution and subsequent reforms was Stalin and Lenin in the USSR, and Maoism in China—at the time, the alternative option of 'modernity' for much of the world. [Woube and Sjöberg \(1999\)](#) argue that Ethiopia was one of the few African countries that actually imposed a Marxist-Leninist version of socialism.

During the Derg's rule, several armed resistance movements arose across Ethiopia in an attempt to overthrow the regime, generating conflicts that displaced local populations within Ethiopia and across its borders. At the same time, long-standing and new conflicts with outside powers exacerbated refugee movements. The Eritrean War of Independence, which began in 1961, escalated in 1967, and continued until 1991, generated significant cross-border movement from Ethiopia into Sudan. A brief border war in the Ogaden region in 1964, followed by the 1977–8 Ethio-Somali war, displaced many more into Somalia. Refugee numbers reported by the US Committee for Refugees show an increase from 55,000 Ethiopian refugees in the Horn of Africa in 1972 to 1.1 million in 1987 ([Bariagaber 1997](#)). Throughout the 1960s until at least the late 1980s, Ethiopia was the origin of over 80 per cent of the refugee population in the Horn of Africa ([Bariagaber 1997](#)).

In the face of persistent internal and external challenges, the Derg and its leader, Mengistu Haile Mariam, struggled to maintain power. The unification of several liberation forces into the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1989 and 1990 hastened the decline of the communist regime, which no longer had Soviet support after the end of the Cold War. In 1990, during this period of political conflict and transition, over 1.68 million Ethiopians were abroad (UN 2019).

When the communist government was overthrown in 1991, a three-year process began to determine what the new state would look like. This time, the writers of a new constitution looked to the West, and Ethiopian expatriates returned to help create the new charter for a democratic, ethnic federalism ([Gidada and Lemma 2016](#)). The implementation of the new state, however, spearheaded by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, again looked to the East—to the development trajectories of South Korea and Taiwan, where the state played a heavy-handed role in economic development with impressive results ([de Waal 2013](#)). Initially, the government focused on agricultural development as the cornerstone of its economic strategy. However, in the 2000s, facing poor economic growth, internal political challenges, and international pressures, the government shifted its development strategy to embrace industrial capitalism, greater foreign investment, and the expansion of private enterprise and market forces. As a result, Ethiopia reported unprecedented economic growth, yet not without political backlash. Frustrations over undemocratic rule and unequal access to the fruits of Ethiopia's progress led to widespread protests, beginning in 2005 and continuing for over a decade thereafter. During this time, many Oromos, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group that has long complained of political repression and economic marginalization, fled the country.

### 3.2 Drought, famine, and resettlement

Over the course of these three regimes, significant displacement also occurred as a result of drought and famine. [Ezra \(2001\)](#), citing [Rahmato \(1994\)](#), describes 9 major famine episodes in the 19th century and 11 in the 20th. Although drought is common throughout Ethiopia's arid lowlands, most of the major famines have been concentrated in the northern regions, namely Wello and Tigray. Two of the worst famines occurred in 1973–4 and 1983–4. During the 1983–4 famine, as many as 2.5 million people were internally displaced, and at least 400,000 people fled the country ([Wolde-Giorgis 1989](#)). However, many of the most vulnerable remained trapped in the countryside, where poor road infrastructure and petty politics prevented them from receiving food aid or accessing distribution centers ([Piguet and Pankhurst 2009](#)). Under these circumstances, famine did not mean migration; it meant starvation. No one knows exactly how many died in the 1973–4 famine, but estimates range from 200,000 to 1 million ([Van Santen 2010](#)), and as many as 1.2 million died in the 1983–4 famine ([Gill 2010](#)).

Whether drought leads to famine, and whether famine leads to migration (or starvation), depends on a number of factors beyond environmental variables. The 1973–4 and the 1983–4 famines showed that infrastructure is crucial to facilitate the provision of food aid and services to peripheral regions of the country where rural agriculturalists and pastoralists were suffering. Perhaps even more important, though, is politics, that is, whether the State feels compelled to take the necessary measures to prevent or alleviate the effects of drought (see [Sen 1999](#)). In this regard, resettlement was one major (and contested) strategy that all three regimes employed to address the problem of drought and food insecurity.

Resettlement began as a few '*ad hoc* initiatives' under Haile Selassie in 1966 and became a major government strategy of the communist regime in the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in the resettlement of over half a million people in 1985–6 ([Piguet and Pankhurst 2009](#): 9). Before the 1974 revolution, the Imperial regime resettled some 10,000 households—constituting 0.2 per cent of rural households at the time, as compared to 5 per cent of rural households that migrated 'spontaneously' ([Piguet and Pankhurst 2009](#): 9, citing [Wood 1985](#)). Under the communist regime, the numbers and pace of resettlement increased. From 1974 to 1983, before the 1984 famine, some 46,000 households (187,000 people) were resettled in 88 sites across 11 regions. In the aftermath of the 1984 famine, an 'Emergency Phase' plan resettled over half a million people between October 1984 and January 1986, constituting what [Piguet and Pankhurst](#) describe as 'one of the most complex, ambitious and draconian measures ever attempted by the Ethiopian government' (2009: 10; see also [Sivini 1986](#)).

The imperial regime and the Derg justified their resettlement programs as a proactive strategy to address a wide range of perceived social ills beyond food insecurity: to redistribute populations more efficiently, develop less populated areas and increase agricultural productivity, safeguard populations against the threat of famine, provide land for the landless, establish cooperatives, lessen urban unemployment, settle pastoralists, and shifting agriculturalists, and rehabilitate repatriated refugees ([Woldemeskel 1989](#); [Piguet and Pankhurst 2009](#): 9). But resettlement was never the magic bullet government planners hoped it would be. Due to inadequate planning, financial constraints, and the lack of



experienced personnel to manage these projects, ‘the results were generally poor, the schemes tended to fail, and most settlers left the projects’ (Sivini 1986; Woldemeskel 1989; Piguet and Pankhurst 2009: 9). Resettlement, nevertheless, remains a common development and humanitarian strategy, even under the current government. From 2003 to 2005, for example, a plan of the New Coalition for Food Security resettled over half a million people across Oromiya, Amhara, SNNP, and Tigray. These efforts also faced significant obstacles, namely lack of adequate housing, water or other resources for the resettled populations, and lack of consideration for the rights of pastoralists in areas of resettlement, exacerbating conflicts over environmental resources (World Bank 2007: 117).

Aside from formal, state-sponsored resettlement, voluntary short-distance movements appear to be more common than long-distance migration as a household adaptation strategy to drought. As Jónsson (2010) showed in the context of the Sahel region, drought leads to resource scarcity, which means many people do not have the means to invest in long-distance or international migration. Furthermore, the ways in which people move or stay in response to drought are heterogeneous. For example, Gray and Mueller (2012) find that men from poor households in the Ethiopian highlands were more likely to engage in labor migration when drought strikes, while marriage-related moves by women tend to decrease under the same conditions. Of course, not every household is able to support a migration project as an adaptation strategy or receives aid during periods of drought or famine. These are the ‘displaced in place’ (cf. Lubkemann 2008) and the most vulnerable to food insecurity.

Finally, other forms of development-induced displacement—related to the construction of dams, agricultural or industrial parks, and urban expansion—have had direct and indirect effects on internal mobility (Cernea 2003; Pankhurst and Piguet 2009). Some people are directly displaced and compensated by the government for their lost lands, while others are indirectly marginalized by such projects, excluded from resources that historically supported their livelihoods. The sedentarization of nomadic populations is one consequence, as land seizure for new economic projects or national parks make nomadic lifestyles less and less viable (see Devereux 2006; Lautze et al. 2006; Haggmann and Mulugeta 2008; Pankhurst and Piguet 2009; Rettberg 2010).

This and the previous section emphasize the drivers of displacement: political conflict, famine, resettlement schemes, and other forms of development-induced displacement. However, each of Ethiopia’s three regimes also pursued different visions for Ethiopia’s economic development that fundamentally reshaped livelihood opportunities and constraints across the country and stimulated new forms of voluntary migration, both internal and international. The following section examines how these economic transformations impacted the nature and direction of migration trends.

### 3.3 Commercial agriculture and industrialization

Within Ethiopia, internal labor migration historically occurred from the more highly populated northern highlands toward the less densely populated south, southwest and east of the country (Ezra 2001). In the early 20th century, this ‘frontier migration’ (cf. Zelinsky 1971) included peasants leaving situations of land scarcity and low agricultural productivity to search for more fertile lands, and soldiers settling lands gifted as tribute by

the imperial regime (World Bank 2007). In the 1950s through 1970s, movement from the highlands to the lowlands continued but began to change in nature as Ethiopia's economy diversified.

Under Haile Selassie, economic development entailed the growth of light industries like cotton, sugar, cement, leather, and printing factories. Commercial agriculture began in some areas of Ethiopia, often those accessible to the railway lines, and internal migration was increasingly directed toward wage-work on these state- or privately-owned enterprises: for example, cotton and sugar plantations in the Rift Valley and Awash valley, coffee plantations in the south and southwest, and farms harvesting sesame, beans and oil seeds in the north-west (Ezra 2001; Piguët and Pankhurst 2009). This movement was often seasonal, but over time, it also led to the settlement of migrant laborers in these areas and the emergence of new towns (Pankhurst 2001; World Bank 2007; Blunch and Laderchi 2015).

Ethiopia's economic development during this period was uneven. Many agricultural developments were run by foreign investors—including the Dutch in sugar, the Japanese in textiles, the Greeks in shoes and beverages, and the Italians in construction, textile, and agricultural industries (Wubneh 1991)—and Ethiopian-owned companies were dominated by the interests of large landowners with close links to Haile Selassie (Clapham 2015). By the early 1970s, foreign capitalists held almost 70 per cent of investments in Ethiopia, and the economy was divided between a large traditional agricultural sector, living at the level of subsistence, and a small modern sector based on urban growth and exports (Prunier and Ficquet 2015: 212). The unequal nature of this economic development was one spark for the communist revolution in the 1970s.

After the fall of Haile Selassie in 1974, the Derg took total control of the economy and created a nationalist socialist party, all 'in the name of *hibretesebawinet* ("socialism"), a new word it had just invented' (Prunier and Ficquet 2015: 218). In many ways, the Derg's plans followed classic communist prescriptions: the nationalization of land and businesses, the creation of over 30,000 peasant associations in the countryside and urban dwellers associations in cities, the establishment and investment in collective and state-run farms, the formation of a single Workers party, and controlled freedom of speech and press (Pankhurst 2001; Prunier and Ficquet 2015: 226). The foreign investors that had been attracted to Ethiopia in the 1950s and 1960s fled, many returning only after the communist government fell in the 1990s.

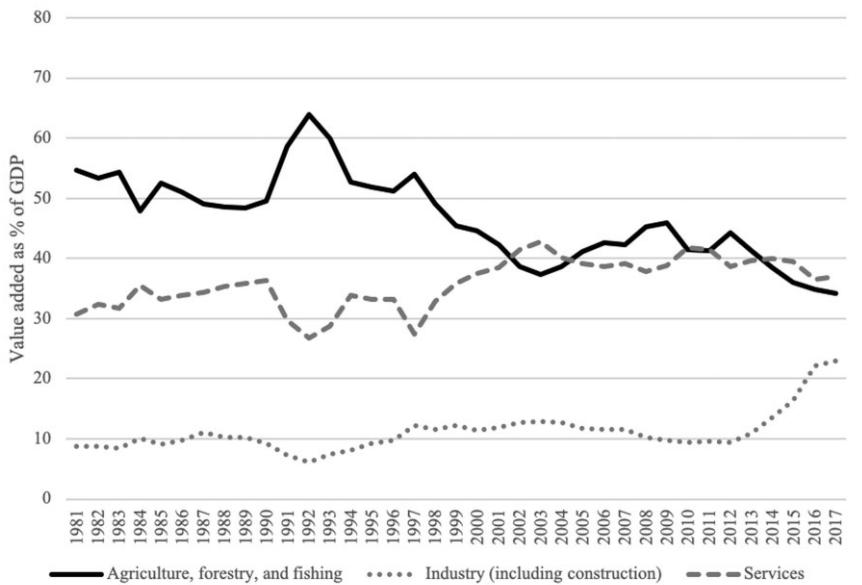
The political and economic changes pursued by the communist regime had varying impacts on population movements. On the one hand, labor migration continued, even as many private- and foreign-owned enterprises were overtaken by the Derg (Piguët and Pankhurst 2009). In fact, it often became state-sponsored: conscription was introduced by the Derg not just for military purposes, but also to fill labor shortages on state farms. On the other hand, state planning under a Marxist-Leninist vision put a new emphasis on the control of the population movements. Under Haile Selassie, many highland areas already had forms of land tenure that tied peasants to plots, but in other lowland and more peripheral regions of the country, the imperial regime deployed a decentralized political structure that allowed for customary land tenure systems and more mobile livelihoods (Gnamo 2014). Under the Derg, the penetration of the state into these regions reached new levels, and new land policies—including regulations prohibiting the sale of land, loss

of land rights for those who leave rural areas, and registration requirements for new internal migrants—constrained mobility. Furthermore, peasant associations tied access to government resources to one's registered residence, often incentivizing settlement and staying put (Schewel 2019). Some suggest that internal migration rates were lower in Ethiopia than the rest of sub-Saharan Africa during this period (Mcdowell and de Haan 1997).

After the communist government fell in 1991, the EPRDF coalition government initially adopted a development vision that remained, in many ways, inspired by socialist ideals. In opposition to the neoliberal Washington Consensus prevalent at the time, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi believed that under imperfect conditions of rent-seeking and patronage, development requires a strong state to create the conditions under which a healthy market and democratic order can function (i.e. a 'developmental state'; see Zenawi 2012; Clapham 2018). The Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization (ADLI) strategy initially adopted was conceived as an endogenous development strategy that embraced government control and marginalized private enterprise (Clapham 2015: 364; Lefort 2015). It expected that growth in agricultural productivity would create demand for basic consumer goods, leading to the emergence of simple industries. The growth of industry would then create employment opportunities for the rural labor force that would become increasingly detached from the land as productivity gains increased and fewer laborers were needed (Clapham 2015). By the early 2000s, however, it was clear that the ADLI strategy was not working as hoped. Agricultural productivity stagnated, and GDP growth rates were lower than at the end of the Derg. The EPRDF began to face significant disapproval both in towns and the countryside, and the 2005 elections were a turning point. The regime changed course and decided its new legitimacy would have to be found in 'the promise of massive economic growth' (Clapham 2015: 365). This led to a second stage in the regime's approach to modernization, one that was much more sympathetic to the role of private actors, foreign investment, free enterprise, and market forces than the first stage (Lefort 2015).

Following this shift in development policy, the share of the Ethiopian population employed in agriculture dropped. Although the contribution of agriculture to Ethiopia's GDP was already declining since the 1980s (Fig. 6), this sector remained the main occupation of the vast majority of the population until 2000. However, the 2000s saw a steady decline in agricultural employment, from 85.8 per cent in 2000 to 68.2 per cent in 2017 (WDI 2020). Most of those who left agriculture found work in the service sector. In Ethiopia—like many other African countries—the service sector has grown faster than manufacturing and industry. Accordingly, employment in services jumped from 10.5 per cent in 2000 to 22.4 per cent in 2017. Industrial jobs employ <10 per cent of the population (WDI 2020).

Over this same period, particularly since the 1990s and 2000s, more foreign companies—from agricultural, floricultural or meat processing enterprises to manufacturing and industrial parks—are strategically established in regions surrounding Addis Ababa or easily connected to its airport through the main railways or highway routes. Like under Haile Selassie, these companies' proximity to the main roads accelerate the growth of neighboring towns (Piguet and Pankurst 2009; Schewel 2018). As towns grow, so too do



**Figure 6.** Sector analysis of Ethiopian economic development.

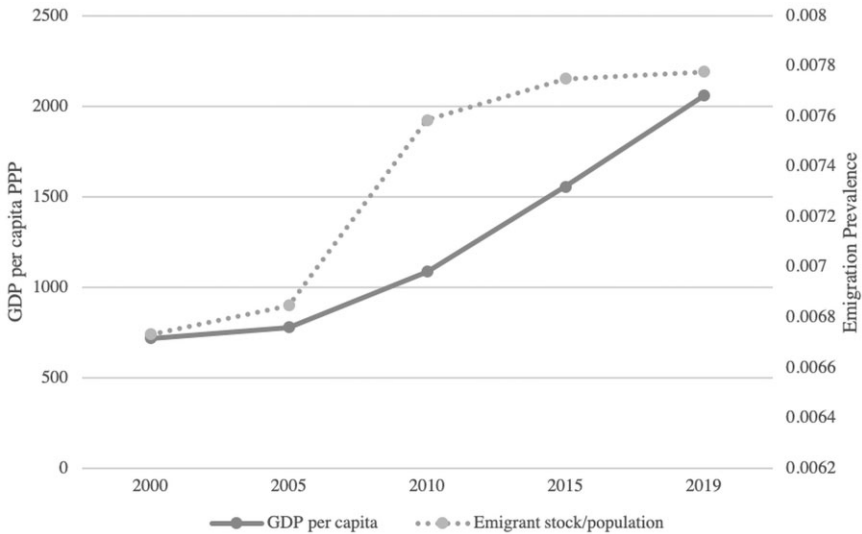
Source: WDI 2019.

services like banking, insurance, restaurants and hotels, shops, and trading companies—generating new employment opportunities in the formal and informal service sector.

These economic transformations help explain why, since the 2000s, rural–urban migration became more common. As Fig. 7 shows, emigration also increased over this period, supporting the positive correlation between GDP growth and emigration rates suggested in recent literature (de Haas 2010; Clemens 2020). Earlier heights of emigration—the significant regional movement in 1990, for example—do not correlate with GDP growth, because this cross-border movement was largely displacement in the midst of political conflict. While displacement continues across Ethiopia, rising levels of emigration today are increasingly associated with the pursuit of better-paying work in other countries. This rise in international labor migration appears to be driven by the economic transformations associated with rapid GDP growth and Ethiopia’s growing connectivity to other countries. Labor migration that has long been directed toward destinations within Ethiopia is now extending across its borders.

### 3.4 Formal education

The political and economic transformations highlighted above miss one important driver of new migration trends in recent years: the rapid expansion of formal schooling across Ethiopia and the changing aspirations and expectations it engenders in young people (see



**Figure 7.** Tracking GDP per capita growth and emigration prevalence, 2000–19.

Sources: UN (2019) and WDI (2020).

Notes: GDP per capita PPP (constant 2017 international \$). Averages based on previous five years (previous four years for 2019). Emigration prevalence refers to emigrant stock as a percentage of the total population

White 2012; Sumberg et al. 2014; Schewel and Fransen 2018). Widening access to education is crucial to understand why internal migration is increasingly urban-oriented, and why international migration trajectories have diversified over time.

Under Haile Selassie, expanding education was a key feature of his modernization agenda and an area aid donors like the USA were eager to support (Pankhurst 2001; Clapham 2015). Schools remained relatively rare, however, concentrating in the capital city and a few other towns. In 1961, only 3.3 per cent of primary school aged children were enrolled in formal education, and 0.5 per cent in secondary (Bishaw and Lasser 2012). Those seeking tertiary education often migrated abroad. Donald Levine (1965) presents some indication of the extent of this movement; he estimates that prior to the Italian occupation in the 1930s, close to 200 Ethiopians studied abroad, with the primary destination countries being France and Switzerland, then Egypt, England, the USA, and Italy (Levine 1965: 194–195). As of June 1959, there were some 500 Ethiopian returnees, mostly from the USA and Canada, then the UK, Lebanon, Western Germany, and India. Destinations of those who left in the late 50s also included Egypt, Italy, France, Israel, and Sweden (see Levine 1965: 195).

Under the Derg, emigration for education continued, but the primary destinations shifted toward communist countries, such as the former USSR, China, Cuba, and some Eastern European countries. The most important educational initiative under the Derg, however, was the expansion of primary education within Ethiopia, particularly to rural

areas—a policy with significant mobility consequences for those who had access to it. The Derg intended to establish a school in every peasant association of the country, and while it fell far short of this goal, the number of young people in primary school rose from less than half a million in 1968–69 to 2.8 million in the later years of communist state (World Bank 2005). Secondary and tertiary education also increased, but at a much lower level, over this period.

The current government has focused on the rapid expansion of its education sector at both ends of the spectrum, primary and tertiary. Gross primary school enrollment rates rose from 55 per cent in 2000 to over 100 per cent in 2015, though completion rates were substantially lower, rising from 22 to 54 per cent over this same period (WDI 2020). Gross secondary school enrollment rates were 35 per cent in 2015, and 8 per cent in tertiary in 2014 (WDI 2020). Investment in tertiary education has been substantial, with the number of public universities growing from three in 1986 to 44 in 2017, alongside a rapidly multiplying private sector offering college and university-level courses. Opportunities for technical and vocational training are also increasing across Ethiopia, targeting young people who fail the National Educational Assessment and Examinations after the 10th grade.

Higher educational attainment is associated with greater spatial mobility. Internal migrants in Ethiopia tend to have higher levels of education than nonmigrants (Blunch and Laderchi 2015), and Table 5 shows that certain migration trajectories are associated with more or less schooling and literacy. The characteristics of those who stay and rural–rural migrants are similar: over half of this population has no formal schooling. Rural–rural migrants have completed, on average, just 2.88 years. Rural–urban migrants have higher levels of schooling and literacy, and those leaving from urban areas tend to have the highest. The relatively high educational attainment of urban–rural migrants reflects in part those moving as government employees, as teachers or administrators, for example, assigned to work in rural areas.

The links between education and migration are manifold. For rural youth, achieving secondary and higher education often requires moving to a town or city, because schools

**Table 5.** Educational characteristics of internal migrants by migration trajectory

Indicator	Non-migrants	Rural to rural migrants	Rural to urban migrants	Urban to rural migrants	Urban to urban migrants
Literacy (1 = yes)	–	0.44	0.70	0.76	0.84
Years of schooling (mean)	–	2.88	5.77	7.14	7.82
No schooling	0.52	0.51	0.27	0.22	0.13
Primary education	0.37	0.39	0.49	0.40	0.45
Secondary education	0.09	0.08	0.23	0.34	0.34
Higher education	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.08

*Notes:* Based on Labour Force Survey 2013 data. Recent migrants are individuals who moved across zones less than five years prior to survey data collection. Based on the population aged  $\geq 15$  years. *Source:* Adapted from Schewel and Franses 2018: 564.

are simply not available in rural areas (Erulkar et al. 2006; Schewel and Fransen 2018; Schewel 2019). Furthermore, formal education tends to teach students values, attitudes, and skills that are oriented toward professional, urban employment, and fuel the social devaluation of agricultural work (see Tadele and Gella 2012; White 2012; Mains 2013; Maurus 2016). As the Ethiopian economy grows and diversifies, labor markets concentrate skilled labor in urban areas, and higher levels of education can boost the expected economic returns of a migration project (Blunch and Laderchi 2015). Montenegro and Patrinos (2014) find that Ethiopia has relatively high returns to schooling, with an 18.5 per cent increase in labor market earnings for each additional year of schooling completed and the highest returns (32.7 per cent) for primary school completion. These factors help explain why Schewel and Fransen (2018) find that even just primary levels of education are associated with greater migration aspirations among young people across Ethiopia.

Regarding international migration, low levels of overall educational attainment in Ethiopia may help explain relatively low levels of emigration. Total educational attainment in Ethiopia is nearly 20 per cent lower than other African countries at similar levels of economic development (Donnenfeld 2017). Yet, among the cohort that achieved tertiary levels, emigration is significant. For example, the emigration rate to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries was just 0.7 per cent of the total Ethiopian population in 2015–6, but 14 per cent for highly educated Ethiopians (d'Aiglepiere et al. 2020)—a rise from 10 per cent in 2000–1 (Arslan et al. 2014). As Dao et al. (2018) suggest, one reason emigration appears to rise with development is that a greater share of the population become college-graduates, the cohort with the greatest propensity to emigrate (see also Docquier et al. 2014). This appears to be the case in Ethiopia, yet it is also notable that rising levels of primary and secondary education also seem to increase migration propensities for some forms of labor migration. Female labor migrants in the Middle East, for example, show higher educational attainment than non-migrants, usually just upper primary or lower secondary levels (Kuschminder and Siegel 2014; Fernandez 2020; Schewel 2021). Rising access to formal education appears to stimulate the aspiration to leave as well as the capability to do so, by enhancing the knowledge, skills, and networks people need to realize a migration project.

### 3.5 Infrastructure development

The political, economic, and educational transformations described above were only achieved through significant infrastructure development across Ethiopia, whether through roads, rail, air, or information communication services. Infrastructure development contributes to growing rural–urban and urban–urban connectivity and integration, which lowers information and capability thresholds for those considering a migration project, whether to a nearby town, a more distant urban center, or abroad.

Significant road expansion in Ethiopia occurred under Emperor Menelik II in the late 19th and early 20th century. In fact, Emperor Menelik is said to have participated himself in constructing roads, so vital were they to his modernization and integration ambitions (Pankhurst 2001). Under the brief Italian occupation, the Italians built over 6,000 km of roads and trails, and although many bridges and roads were destroyed when they left, they laid an initial infrastructure that was built upon in the decades to come. Haile

Selassie established the Imperial Highway Authority in 1951, and many roads in the 1960s were built by foreign contractors. The Derg created a Rural Roads Department in 1978, to facilitate connectivity to rural areas, in addition to the Highway Authority. The EPRDF government established the Road Sector Development Program in 1997, which expanded Ethiopia's road network from 26,550 km of which 3,708 were paved, to 49,000 km. Road expansion continues, making up about a quarter of the infrastructure budget. Foreign companies, primarily Chinese firms, are playing a key role in road construction in recent years. By 2015, the road network had doubled to over 100,000 km.

As a result of road development, rural areas are now in closer contact with urban centers. Dorosh and Schmidt (2010) found that the percentage of people residing in or within three hours of a city of at least 50,000 rose from 15.5 per cent in 1984 to 48.5 per cent in 2007. Growing rural–urban connectivity has significant consequences on internal mobility: more rural people are exposed to goods, services, and basic facilities (e.g. electricity or tap water), that may not be available in rural areas, and it leads to the creation and transformation of markets as more people access urban centers. At the same time, infrastructure development can also reduce the need for some populations to move. For example, in periods of drought or famine, more sophisticated roads and communication infrastructure facilitates the distribution of aid to peripheral populations that might otherwise have been displaced.

Accompanying road construction is significant government investment in railway networks. Beginning even earlier than roads, the first railway connected Addis Ababa to the coast—starting in Djibouti in French Somaliland in 1897, reaching Dire Dawa in 1902 and Addis Ababa in 1917. As a land-locked nation, the railway network is vital for trade. A new railway linking Addis Ababa and Djibouti's port opened in 2017, shortening the travel time between the two countries from 3 days by truck to around 12 h by rail. More than 95 per cent of Ethiopia's trade passes through Djibouti's port. These long-standing transportation links to Djibouti are also reflected in the movements of people. Djibouti has remained a top destination of Ethiopian emigrants since the time of Haile Selassie (Table 3).

As airline infrastructure develops, foreign companies strategically locate their businesses along routes with easy access to the airport, and contribute to the growth of towns along these routes. The growing ease and decreasing cost of international travel also relieves some of the constraints on international migration for Ethiopians. The number of airline passengers carried rose from 231,000 in 1970 to 620,3000 in 1990 to over 7 million in 2015 (WDI 2020). A growing migration industry that facilitates the labor migration of Ethiopian women to the Middle East relies upon this airline infrastructure.

Finally, the expansion of communications technology has been slow across Ethiopia, and connectivity rates remain relatively low. Radio and television were the first revolutions in information sharing, and the state-run programs played an important part in national-state formation. The first television program, Ethiopian Educational Television, was overseen by the Ministry of Education and first broadcast in October 1965. By 2005, just over half the population (51 per cent) had ever watched television; just 13.8 per cent had watched television in the week prior to being surveyed (Gebretsadik 2006). More recently, the use of mobile phones and the internet is widening access to information about opportunities and lifestyles across Ethiopia and elsewhere. Mobile phone usage grew from 31 to 39 per cent between 2014 and 2019 (GSMA 2020), and Internet access is even more



recent, rising from less than one per cent of the population using the Internet in 2010 to 19 per cent in 2019 (WDI 2020). The implications of this recent and growing connectivity on migration trends are an area for further scrutiny in the coming years.

## 4. Discussion and conclusion

Because of the relatively rapid regime changes and protracted conflicts that characterized much of the last half-century, many prioritize political-violence variables as the primary drivers of population movements within and from Ethiopia (see [Bariagaber 1997](#); [Terrazas 2007](#)). Our analyses show that clearly, conflict has been a key part of Ethiopia's migration history, as are famine, resettlement schemes and other forms of development-induced displacement. These drivers of displacement also remain a part of Ethiopia's present. At the time of writing, there is a new civil war in Tigray. Over 2 million peoples are now internally displaced across Ethiopia (IDMC 2021), and the threat of famine looms large. The trajectory of the Tigray conflict will undoubtedly have significant consequences for the country's development and migration trends in the coming years.

Yet, to reduce Ethiopia's migration history to a story of conflict and displacement obscures fundamental inter-generational shifts in the structure of Ethiopian society and in the aspirations of its peoples that are reshaping how and where people move. In this regard, we suggest the relatively recent and rising trend in formal and informal international labor migration is one important manifestation of a more complex shift in Ethiopia's mobility complex, taking place over the course of the last century and accelerating since the 2000s. To expand discussions about the drivers of migration in Ethiopia, we identified three core shifts that together constitute an emerging mobility transition: the sedentarization of traditional forms of seasonal mobility, the urbanization of internal migration, and the diversification of international migration. We then applied a social transformation perspective to examine how different dimensions of development and social change contributed to these mobility shifts. Several of our conclusions have relevance beyond the Ethiopian case.

First, we find that as the modern national state expanded, nomadic and semi-nomadic livelihoods became less and less viable. All three government regimes—the imperial regime, the communist government, and the developmental state—were built upon and reinforced a sedentary logic that assumes settled life as the norm, and through its bureaucratic structure, service provisions, and land policies, directly or indirectly had the effect of tying people to places. This is an important finding for research on mobility transitions, which often begin from the assumption that populations are largely immobile and become more mobile as modernization proceeds (see [Skeldon 1990](#)). On the contrary, a range of case studies across geographic and cultural contexts find that 'development' often entails a decline in nomadic, circular and seasonal mobility associated with traditional economic systems (see, e.g. [Skeldon 1990](#) on Papua New Guinea and Peru, [de Haas 2003](#) on Morocco, [Rodriguez-Pena 2020](#) on the Amazon Basin, and [Osburg 2020](#) on French Guiana).

Second, as traditional mobility systems declined, new forms of internal and international migration emerged, shaped by the economic and educational transformations

designed to hasten Ethiopia's transition from a primarily rural, agricultural to urban, industrial, and service economy. Across the three regimes, there has been a slow yet steady urbanization of Ethiopia's population, a trend that mirrors global experience and will likely continue in the coming decades. Nevertheless, our findings suggest the pace and timing of this urban transition are intimately linked to the country's shifting development strategies. Under the communist regime, for example, the focus on rural development and the more explicit ambition to control population movements helps explain why such a large share of Ethiopia's population remained in rural, agricultural livelihoods for so long. Agriculture remained the main occupation of more than 85 per cent of the population until 2000. It was only after the relatively abrupt shift in the economic rationale of the developmental state—in particular its embrace of market forces, private entrepreneurship, industrial capitalism—that the share of the population working in agriculture significantly decreased, that rural–urban migration replaced rural–rural migration as the most common type of internal migration, and labor emigration increased. Alongside these more structural shifts is a concomitant urbanization of the social imaginary (Schewel 2021). Young generations in Ethiopia increasingly devalue rural livelihoods, in large part because of their growing access to formal education and changing ideas about what constitutes 'good work' and a 'good life'.

Third, international migration from Ethiopia diversified in nature and direction over the last half century. International migration for educational, religious or trade purposes under Haile Selassie became increasingly dominated by regional and long-distance asylum-seeking movements under the Derg. Under the current government, these migrations continue, but new forms of regular and irregular labor migration to a growing number of destinations are gaining prevalence. As a result, the composition of international migrants today reflects a much wider swath of Ethiopian society. Perhaps, the most striking example of this is the migration of young women to the Middle East for domestic work. The predominant focus on volumes and rates of international migration in migration research may detract from this more significant process of diversification of international mobility in early stages of the mobility transition.

Nevertheless, a distinct characteristic of Ethiopian emigration is that it remains relatively low. This is likely for several reasons: persistent poverty and low educational attainment and connectivity continue to characterize the lives of many of Ethiopia's peoples. Despite rapid economic growth since the 2000s, Ethiopia remains one of the poorest countries on a per capita basis in the world. Internal and international migration projects often require significant financial, human, and social capital to realize. Thus, low levels of income, education, and opportunity are likely a key explanation for why migration levels remain relatively low. In addition, the fact that Ethiopia was never formally colonized may explain why emigration is lower than other African countries at similar levels of human development. Italy occupied Ethiopia for five years, with ramifications for the country's political and economic trajectory (Pankhurst 2001), but never consolidated a lasting colonial administration in the country. This brief occupation did not generate a 'migration system' (Kritz et al. 1992; Mabogunje 2010) between Ethiopia and Italy, as colonization did between other African and European countries in the postcolonial era. Furthermore, Ethiopia is the second most populous and tenth largest country in Africa. In large, urbanizing countries, internal migration may absorb migration potential that might otherwise

become international migration from smaller countries (cf. [Adepoju 1998](#); [de Haas and Fransen 2018](#)).

Juxtaposing the Ethiopian case with other countries at similar levels of human and economic development is an important area for further comparative research into the mobility transition and its variations across space and time. As [Skeldon \(2012\)](#) reminds us, ‘no single path of sequential change in migration or any other variable can be expected to exist, and reversals or stasis will occur’ (164). Yet, variation should not inhibit more general theory building:

‘The idea of transition has been central to thinking and theorizing about development, and the growing interest in the topic of migration and development once again should place transitions at the centre of concern. Transitions provide a framework for the structure of human movement in time and space that allow the incorporation of other dimensions of change – agriculture, industry, or state structure – to create a future fertile environment in which to theorise migration’ ([Skeldon 2012](#): 164).

Overall, the Ethiopian case supports the general observation that rising international migration accompanies processes of human and economic development in low-income countries, yet it also shows that rising international migration is but one facet of a broader transformation in a societies’ mobility complex. In this regard, the three core mobility shifts identified here—the sedentarization of traditional forms of seasonal or circular mobility, the urbanization of internal migration trajectories, and the diversification of international migration—are likely general enough to capture big-picture shifts in emerging mobility transitions elsewhere. This can help move migration and development discussions beyond a focus solely on international migration to better understand how and why the entire mobility complex of a given society changes as the social transformations associated with modern-day development proceed.

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## Endnotes

1. This relationship has been described in various ways: as the mobility transition ([Zelinsky 1971](#); [Skeldon 1990, 2012](#); [Dao et al. 2018](#)), the migration curve ([Akerman 1976](#)), the migration transition ([Gould 1979](#); [de Haas 2010](#)), and emigration life cycle

- (Clemens 2020). See Skeldon (2019) for a review of how Zelinsky's original hypothesis of the 'mobility transition' has been applied, forgotten and rediscovered within migration studies over the last 50 years.
2. In 2012, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs estimated up to 60-70 per cent of labor migration to the Middle East occurred through non-formal channels (US DOS 2012).
  3. A note on terminology: throughout the article, we use the term 'mobility' as an umbrella term to capture a range of spatial movements, including seasonal or circular mobility as well as the permanent or semi-permanent changes in residence more often associated with the term 'migration.' 'Emigration' refers exclusively to international migration. We retain a focus on 'migration' in our research question, in order to clearly contribute to 'migration studies', but we suggest that to understand how and why migration patterns change, it is helpful to examine how other forms of mobility shift in tandem.
  4. Regarding the normative connotations of the term 'development', we agree with Amartya Sen's reminder that many social and economic changes made in the pursuit of development can disempower local populations at the same time that they enrich the national gross domestic product (Sen 1999)—through, for example, undermining the viability of traditional livelihoods. Thus, when we use the term 'development', we emphasize what the pursuit of development has practically entailed in Ethiopia, reserving judgment about whether or not these social changes have been positive or negative (see de Haas et al 2020).
  5. Our analyses of the political drivers of migration reach until the mid 2010s, prior to the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister in 2018 and the creation of the Prosperity Party in 2019.
  6. The 1984 census, for example, covered about 81 percent of the Ethiopian population, omitting lowland areas with nomadic populations. The 1994 census did not cover the nomadic populations of Afar and Somali regions where pastoralists are dominant (see Randall 2015).

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## Appendix

Table A1. Number and percentage of total and urban population by region in Ethiopia, 1994 and 2007

Regions and city administrations	1994						2007					
	Total population			Total urban population			Total population			Total urban population		
	N	%		N	%		N	%		N	%	
Tigray	3,136,267	5.86		468,478	14.94		4,316,988	5.86		844,040	19.55	
Afar	1,060,573	1.98		79,258	7.47		1,390,273	1.89		185,135	13.32	
Amhara	13,834,297	25.87		1,265,315	9.15		17,221,976	23.38		2,112,595	12.27	
Oromia	18,732,525	35.03		1,970,088	10.52		26,993,933	36.65		3,317,460	12.29	
Somali	3,198,514	5.98		437,035	13.66		4,445,219	6.04		623,004	14.02	
Benishangul-Gumuz	460,459	0.86		36,027	7.82		784,345	1.06		105,926	13.51	
S.N.N.P.	10,377,028	19.40		704,818	6.79		14,929,548	20.27		1,495,557	10.02	
Gambella	181,862	0.34		27,424	15.08		307,096	0.42		77,925	25.38	
Harari	131,139	0.25		76,378	58.24		183,415	0.25		99,368	54.18	
Addis Ababa City Adm	2,112,737	3.95		2,084,588	98.67		2,739,551	3.72		2,739,551	100	
Dire Dawa City Adm	251,864	0.47		173,188	68.76		341,834	0.46		233,224	68.26	
Total	53,477,265	100		7,323,207	13.69		73,654,178	100		11,833,785	16.10	

Source: CSA 1998: 14; CSA 2010: 7.