

MEKELLE UNIVERSITY



COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND LANGUAGES DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

Irregular Migration Dynamics in Raya Alamata, Northern Ethiopia: Exploring the Patterns, Determinants, and Emerging Risks in Migration to the Gulf Countries

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies in
Partial Fulfilment of the Award of M.A Degree in Geography and Environmental Studies

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Declaration

I, undersigned, declare that this thesis entitled “Irregular Migration Dynamics in Raya Alamata, Northern Ethiopia: Exploring the Patterns, Determinants, and Emerging Risks in Migration to the Gulf Countries”, is my original work and has not been presented for any other award, and that all sources of materials used in this thesis are duly acknowledged. This thesis was carried out under the close supervision of my principal advisor, Misghna Gebrehiwot (Ph.D.) and my co-advisor Zbelo Tesfamariam (Ph.D.) in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Mekelle University.

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Approval Sheet - I

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Irregular Migration Dynamics In Raya Alamata, Northern Ethiopia: Exploring The Patterns, Determinants And Emerging Risks To The Gulf Countries” submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of MA Degree in Geography and Environmental Studies, in the Post Graduate Program of Mekelle University, College of Social Sciences and Languages, Department of Geography and Environmental Studies has been carried out by Nigus Molla Woldie under my supervision. Therefore, I recommend that the student has fulfilled the requirements and thereby can submit the thesis to the department.

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Approval Sheet - II

We, the undersigned, members of the board examiners of the final open defence have read and evaluated the thesis entitled “Irregular Migration Dynamics in Raya Alamata, Northern Ethiopia: Exploring the Patterns, Determinants and Emerging Risks to The Gulf Countries” and examined the candidate. This is, therefore, to certify that the thesis has been accepted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MA Degree in Geography and Environmental Studies at Mekelle University, College of Social Sciences and Languages.

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Abstract

Irregular migration from northern Ethiopia, particularly from Raya Alamata to Gulf countries, has grown significantly in recent years, shaped by intertwined socioeconomic, political, environmental, and social factors. This study investigates the patterns, determinants, emerging risks, and routes of irregular migration using a mixed-methods design. Data were collected through a field survey of 204 respondents, complemented by key informant interviews with returnees and their families, and focus group discussions with local elders and returnees.

The findings reveal that economic pressures are the strongest drivers, with poverty (91.7%) and unemployment (84.3%) cited as primary motivators, alongside low agricultural productivity (75%), limited farmland (72.5%), and poor access to credit (63.7%). Political instability, particularly linked to the Tigray conflict, was reported by 95.1% of respondents as a key push factor. Environmental stressors such as land degradation, unreliable rainfall, and weak irrigation infrastructure (71.4%) affect nearly 88% of migrants, reinforcing the emergence of “migration-prone” landscapes. Social networks also play a crucial role: family pressure (66.2%) and connections abroad (53.2%) normalize migration as a networked household strategy.

While migration provides important benefits, including remittances (35.8%), improved household living standards (33.3%), asset acquisition (27%), and skill development (6.9%), it exposes migrants to severe risks. These include exploitation (59.3%), unsafe journeys (52%), physical and sexual abuse (48% and 59.3% respectively for women), and legal precarity (36.3%). Migration routes remain perilous, encompassing desert crossings, sea voyages lasting 18–72 hours, and dependence on smugglers who often subject migrants to torture, starvation, and extortion. Three main routes such as via Djibouti, Somalia, and hybrid pathways, were identified, each marked by unique hazards, interception risks, and unpredictable travel durations.

The study documents a 93% increase in irregular migration over the past five years, disproportionately affecting youth (97.1%) and women (99.4%), particularly in conflict-affected communities. Coping strategies rely heavily on informal peer networks, with limited humanitarian support.

These insights underscore the urgency of comprehensive interventions, including legal migration pathways, protection mechanisms, dismantling of smuggling networks, and stronger institutional support in transit zones. By situating irregular migration within broader socioeconomic and political contexts, this study highlights critical implications for migration governance in Ethiopia and across the Gulf corridor.

Keywords: *Irregular migration, Conflict, Livelihood collapse, administrative collapse, human trafficking, Migration routes, Raya Alamata, Northern Ethiopia.*

Chapter 1 -

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Global Context of Migration to the Gulf countries

Migration is the movement of a person or group of persons from one geographical unit to another across an administrative or political border, intending to settle definitively or temporarily in a place other than their place of origin (IOM, 2019).

Migration can be defined in terms of spatial boundaries as internal or international (Beneberu, 2012). Migration can be voluntary, such as when individuals or families move to different locations in search of better economic opportunities, a more favourable climate or improved quality of life. It can also be forced, such as when individuals or families are displaced due to conflict, persecution, oppression or natural disaster (Melaku, 2014).

Migration is increasingly recognized as an essential, inevitable, and potentially beneficial component of the economic and social life of every state and region (Wakessa, 2014). It has both merits and demerits, presenting challenges and opportunities for the countries and individuals involved (Horwood, 2023).

Approximately 282 million people, or 3.6% of the world's population, live outside their countries of birth (IOM, 2024). If the migrant population continues to increase at the same pace as the last 20 years, the stock of international migrants worldwide could reach 405 million by 2050 (IOM, 2010). The number of migrants moving between developing countries is estimated to be as large as those moving from South to North (Ratha & Shaw, 2007). On the other side, internal migrants account for 740 million, bringing the total number of migrants to just under 1 billion worldwide today (Melaku, 2014; United Nations Development Programme, 2009). Hence, the trend of migration in terms of its demographic, economic, political, and social aspect indicate that organizing and regularizing it will be challenging for governments and societies in the coming decades (Dutta, 2004).

Migration has positive economic impacts on migrant households, sending countries, and receiving countries. Young migrants, aged 15 to 24, represent 12% of the global migrant stock in 2013. Migration offers young people opportunities for productive and decent employment, improved socio-economic status, new skills, and increased human and financial capital.

In recent decades, labor migration from less developed countries, especially Africa, South of the Saharan, and South Asia, to the oil-rich Arab Gulf states has surged (IOM, 2024). Between 2000 and 2022, remittance flows reached over USD 831 billion, underscoring the economic significance of circular labor migration (IOM, 2024; World Bank, 2022). Gulf Countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates now host between than 50% of all migrant workers worldwide (ILO, 2021). These migrants predominantly fill vacancies in construction, domestic labor, and informal employment sectors, driven by economic disparities and unmet developmental needs in their origin countries (World Bank, 2022).

However, despite the short-term financial gains, irregular migrants face severe vulnerabilities, including wage theft, extreme working conditions, confiscation of passports, and sexual exploitation, especially in female-dominated sectors (ILO, 2021; Wakessa, 2014). While official migration routes remain tightly managed, unregulated migration grows in response to various socioeconomic, political and environmental concerns, as observed in countries like Ethiopia (De Regt & Tafesse, 2016).

Ethiopia is both a major source and transit country for migrants, particularly towards Gulf countries. Between 2017 and 2023, approximately 1.5 million Ethiopians migrated abroad, with nearly 60% targeting Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and UAE (MoLSA, 2023). The root causes for these migrants include high levels of poverty (over 60% of the population lives below the international poverty line), youth unemployment rates exceeding 25%, and limited landholdings and credit access in rural areas (UNDP, 2021; World Bank, 2019).

Persistent droughts, soil depletion, and climate stress further weaken agricultural subsistence, pushing rural populations to seek alternatives (USAID, 2020). Socially, migration is reinforced through community networks: returnees often finance subsequent migration and spread information, thus lowering risks and costs for prospective migrants (Singleton et al., 2022). The nexus of these factors drives a growing proportion of Ethiopian migrants to use irregular routes, via Djibouti and Yemen, to access unregulated labor markets in the Gulf (De Regt & Tafesse, 2016).

While governments and international partners promote safe migration through formal pathways, irregular routes persist, revealing the insufficiency of these strategies and rural development programs(IOM, 2024; Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, 2014). .

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Migration is a longstanding and complex phenomenon that shapes the demographic, socio-economic, and political contours of societies globally. Its drivers and dynamics vary across geographic contexts, influenced by a multitude of push and pull factors that include poverty, conflict, governance failures, environmental stress, and aspirations for better livelihoods (Castles et al., 2014; de Haas, 2010). In the Horn of Africa, and particularly in Ethiopia, migration has become a defining feature of rural and urban transformation, with significant outflows of people, especially youth, seeking opportunities both within and beyond the region (Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009; IOM, 2020).

Ethiopia, the second most populous country in Africa, with an estimated population exceeding 132 million in 2025, remains largely agrarian, with over 77% of its population residing in rural areas (The World Bank, 2025). These rural areas, particularly in the northern highlands such as the Raya Alamata region, are marked by systemic poverty, land degradation, recurrent droughts, and limited employment opportunities (Gebre-Selassie & Bekele, 2012; Gebrehiwot et al., 2022). As a result, migration has increasingly become a livelihood strategy for households, particularly among the youth, who see limited prospects for upward mobility at home.

A striking dimension of Ethiopian migration is the high incidence of irregular labor migration to the Middle East, primarily to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA), between 2008 and 2013, approximately 460,000 Ethiopian workers were legally deployed abroad, with 94% being women employed as domestic workers (Kuschminder & Siegel, 2014). Saudi Arabia alone accounted for 79% of these deployments. However, estimates suggest that 60–70% of Ethiopian migrants during this period migrated irregularly, either trafficked or smuggled, often through the facilitation of unregistered brokers (Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, 2014).

The issue has become more acute since the outbreak of the Tigray conflict in 2020, which has devastated local economies, displaced populations, and exacerbated socio-political vulnerabilities in northern Ethiopia (ACAPS, 2021b; De Waal, 2021). In Raya Alamata, a border region affected by the conflict, irregular migration to the Middle East has intensified as conflict-affected youth seek escape from insecurity, economic hardship, and social dislocation. These migratory movements, often facilitated by informal and unregulated networks, expose

migrants to extreme risks, including human trafficking, forced labor, sexual exploitation, and psychosocial trauma (Mekonnen & Estefanos, 2012; Mulugeta, 2016).

Despite the growing volume of migration from northern Ethiopia, existing studies have predominantly focused on broader national trends or outflows from urban centres like Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa (Bezu & Holden, 2014; Kuschminder, 2016). There is limited empirical research that specifically investigates migration drivers, the lived experiences of migrants, or the socio-economic consequences for sending communities in rural conflict-affected areas like Raya Alamata. Moreover, the intersection of conflict, gender, irregular migration, and labor exploitation remains underexplored, despite its policy and humanitarian relevance (Bekele & Zeleke, 2021; Kebede, 2020).

This gap in the literature will pose a significant challenge for designing evidence-based policy interventions aimed at migration governance, migrant protection, and development planning. Without localized and context-sensitive knowledge of how conflict and socio-economic vulnerability shape migration decisions and outcomes, policy responses risk being misaligned or ineffective.

Existing researches often highlight mostly push factors for migrating to the Arab countries () but mostly lack localized, mixed-methods analyses of push factors and migrant experiences. This study seeks to fill that gap by:

1. The magnitude of migration experiences and the desire to migrate among communities,
2. Exploring the major push factors as major causes such as economic, social, environmental, and political among prospective and return migrants,
3. Exploring lived experiences of exploitation, social support, and emerging risks during irregular migration,
4. Identifying the major routes for the irregular migration to the Gulf countries from the study area.

Understanding these factors is critical. With Ethiopia's projected labor force continuing to grow, migration trends may intensify without structural reforms. Insights from this study aim to inform policymakers and development practitioners on how to design integrated approaches

that combine rural investment, migration governance, and social protection, reducing reliance on irregular pathways.

In doing so, it responds to urgent calls for contextually informed research that foregrounds the vulnerabilities of rural migrants and promotes more ethical and effective migration governance (IOM, 2020; UNODC, 2021a).

1.3 Objective of the study

1.3.1 General objective

The overall objective of the study was to examine the experience, challenging and determinant factors of migrants and sending family in relation to irregular migration network in northern Ethiopia with a focus area Raya Alamata.

1.3.2 Specific objectives

The specific objectives of the study include

1. To analyse the irregular migration experiences and patterns of communities in Raya Alamata, Northern Ethiopia to the Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and so on.
2. To investigate emerging migration associated risks, including human trafficking, exploitation, and other socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by migrants and sending families.
3. To identify and characterize the routes of irregular migration from northern Ethiopia to the Gulf countries.
4. To analyse the major socioeconomic, political, and environmental determinants influencing migration from northern Ethiopia to the Gulf countries.
5. To evaluate the benefits and challenges of migration at an individual and household level.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What is the migration pattern in Raya Alamata, northern Ethiopia including demographic characteristics, volume and migration desires of the community?
2. What are the emerging risks associated with irregular migration to the Gulf countries?

3. Which route do irregular migrants from northern Ethiopia, particularly Raya Alamata, follow to reach the Gulf countries?
4. What are the key determinants driving migration from northern Ethiopia to the Gulf countries?
5. What are the benefits and challenges associated with irregular migration to the Gulf countries for migrants and their families in Raya Alamata, northern Ethiopia?

1.5 Significance of the study

The output of this research work has some important contributions

- ✓ It provides valuable information for concerned government and non-government bodies and local administration to take effective action how prevent or reduce the major causes of motivation young females and male peoples to cross international border illegal migration from study area.
- ✓ In addition, the study plays a main role in creating awareness to the communities of Raya Alamata and northern Ethiopia at large, and relevant government sectors in addressing the problems.
- ✓ This research is expected to add immense benefit to different stakeholders such as government, non-government organizations and international organizations in the policy domains as well as primary bench mark for further study in this field. It helps in identifying migration incidents, migration routes and the role of illegal brokers and design policies and area specific interventions accordingly.

1.6 Scope of study

In Northern Ethiopia, people are migrating to several countries following both regular and irregular corridors to the Gulf countries especially Saudi Arabia. The scope of the study was geographically limited to the Raya Alamata district in southern Tigray administrative zone of Ethiopia. In addition, the research in its area of investigation focused on current trends, experiences and challenges of migrants and sending families with related the irregular migration networks. For such reason, the research participated return migrants, migrant families, households and elderly groups in different kebeles of the district.

1.7 Limitation of the study

The study focusses on the experience, challenges and determinant factors of irregular migration, and challenging of sending families. The study had many problems in collecting data and making analysis due to:

- ✓ The period after the Tigray war (2021-2022), Raya Alamata has been without administration functions and there was lack of secondary data from the district offices.
- ✓ A key limitation of this study relates to the reduced sample size resulting from security challenges in border kebeles between Raya Alamata (Tigray) and Kobo (Amhara) districts especially Selenwuha and Timuga. Restrictions on movement between households and the sensitivity of interviewing in these areas constrained the planned household survey, reducing the final sample from 370 to 204 households. While the adjusted margin of error (6.8%) remains within acceptable bounds for social science research, the smaller sample size may limit the representativeness of findings and reduce the ability to capture the full diversity of migrant experiences across all kebeles.
- ✓ Shortage of financial resources for the research work also affected the sample size and area coverage for data collection.

1.8 Organization of the study

This thesis is organized in five chapters. The first chapter is introductory that outlines the background of the study, statement of the problem, research objectives, research question and significance of study, limitation and scope of the study. Chapter two presents literature review. Chapter three presents the methodology of the study focusing on the study area description, research design, data type and sources, sampling procedures, data collection tools, and data analysis. Chapter four is the research findings and discussions and the last chapter; chapter five is about the conclusion and recommendation parts.

CHAPTER 2 -

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This review examines both regular and irregular migration, exploring their determinants, typologies, global trends, and contextual specificities with a focus on Ethiopia. While migration offers developmental benefits in the form of remittances, skills transfers, and cultural exchange, it also presents significant challenges such as labor exploitation, trafficking, and social dislocation. Irregular migration, in particular, has emerged as a critical area of concern in both academic literature and policy discourse due to the vulnerabilities it exposes migrants to, including abuse, marginalization, and death.

The review describes in several parts: conceptual and theoretical perspectives on migration; global and regional dynamics of irregular migration; Ethiopia's national migration patterns; and the case of post-conflict northern Ethiopia.

2.2 Forms and Typologies of Migration

Migration has historically been an integral part of human existence, encompassing the voluntary or forced movement of people across geographical boundaries. In academic discourse, migration is conceptualized as the spatial mobility of individuals and groups either internally (within a country) or internationally (across countries), and is shaped by diverse socioeconomic, environmental, political, and cultural contexts (Castles et al., 2014). It is not merely the physical relocation of people but also the transformation of labor markets, cultural identities, and social networks. Contemporary migration patterns are increasingly influenced by globalization, neoliberal restructuring, climate variability, conflict, and demographic transitions, resulting in the rise of both legal and illegal cross-border movements (IOM, 2021a).

Migration can be categorized in multiple overlapping ways. The most fundamental distinction is between internal migration, which occurs within a country's territorial boundaries, and international migration, which entails crossing one or more national borders (IOM, 2019; Lee, 1966). In many low- and middle-income countries, internal migration (especially rural-to-urban) accounts for the majority of movement, whereas international migration is often more visible due to its policy and humanitarian implications.

Migration is further distinguished by regular (legal) and irregular (illegal) status. Regular migration occurs in accordance with the immigration laws of sending, transit, and receiving countries. Migrants may travel for work, education, family reunification, or humanitarian protection. In contrast, irregular migration refers to movements that take place outside the regulatory norms of countries involved. This may involve unauthorized border crossings, overstaying visas, or using fraudulent documents (IOM, 2019).

Another key typology is voluntary versus forced migration. Voluntary migration is based on individual or household decisions seeking better opportunities. Forced migration, meanwhile, is driven by threats to life and dignity such as war, persecution, environmental disasters, or severe economic deprivation (IOM, 2019). Refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and asylum seekers fall under this category (IOM, 2019; UNHCR, 2023).

Irregular migration includes phenomena such as human smuggling and human trafficking. Smuggling refers to the facilitation of illegal entry of individuals into another country, often with the person's consent and involving payment to smugglers. Trafficking, by contrast, is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons by means of threat, force, coercion, or deception for the purpose of exploitation (IOM, 2019; UNODC, 2021a, 2021b).

2.3 Youth Migration

Youth migration has emerged as a defining feature of global mobility, shaped by complex socio-economic, political, and environmental dynamics. Youth, typically defined as individuals aged 15–29, represent a significant proportion of international migrants, often driven by aspirations for education, employment, and safety (IOM, 2024). Youth migration is distinct in its aspirational nature, often reflecting a desire for autonomy, opportunity, and global engagement (de Haas, 2010).

Globally, youth account for over 40% of international migrants, with increasing flows from low-income regions to high-income countries (IOM, 2024). The World Migration Report highlights that while most migrants move through regular channels, irregular migration remains prevalent, especially among youth from fragile states with limited legal pathways (UNHCR, 2025). Gendered patterns persist, young men dominate labor migration, while young women often migrate for education or family reunification (IOM, 2024).

Migration decisions among youth are shaped by:

- *Economic disparities*: High unemployment and income gaps in origin countries (de Haas, 2010).
- *Conflict and instability*: Forced displacement due to war, persecution, and human rights violations (UNHCR, 2025).
- *Climate change*: Environmental degradation and loss of rural livelihoods push youth toward urban and international destinations (IOM, 2024).
- *Social networks and media*: Peer influence and digital narratives amplify migration aspirations (Abbay et al., 2025).

2.4 Smuggling of migrants

The procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the irregular entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident (IOM, 2019).

Smuggling of migrants can be clear, from a sociological perspective by which it includes every act on a continuum between altruism and organized crime, and every act where by an immigrant is assisted in crossing international borders by which this crossing is not endorsed by the government of the receiving state, either implicitly or explicit. In addition to this, smuggling of migrants is a crime defined under international law as” the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a state of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident”, according to article 3(1) of the protocol against the smuggling of migrants by land, sea and Air (IOM, 2019; United Nations, 2000).

2.5 Returnee Migration

In the context of international migration, the movement of persons returning to their country of origin after having moved away from their place of habitual residence and crossed an international border (IOM, 2019).

Return migrants can be categorized in multiple ways. The most evident categorization is based on notions of forced or voluntary migration and forced and voluntary return. It is important to note that return can be further distinguished as to if the return is decided or chosen on one’s initiative without coercion or persuasion or compelled unfavourable circumstances interrupt the migrations cycle resulting in return (Cassarino, 2008).

In fact, most of the women domestic workers from Middle East face great difficulties when they coming back to their dwell countries. Most importantly, financial impediment, lack of entrepreneurship skills, problems related to employment opportunities, lack of support to engage in a viable business, psychiatric problems arising from migration experiences and so forth are worth noting. The consequences of these difficulties can be seen in the life situations of the unsuccessful women when they descend into economic vulnerability. Some women may even return home before finishing their contracts of employment due to mental health problems. This complicates paying back their debts. For them, being indebted may be understood as failure in their work migration (Hanna Gebrekristos, 2014). Even the problem seems huge for women, few men also face equivalent problem.

In most cases women s encounter more problems of reintegration than men, owing to socio-cultural factors. Thus, women’s decision for remigration may result from poorly coordinated reintegration schemes, which do not encompass social and economic reintegration on sustainable basis (Mesfin Dessie, 2011). Most of the motive to the deciding factor for forced s is the situation in the host country.

2.6 Determinants of Migration

Migration decisions are complex and influenced by a constellation of interrelated factors operating at different scales, from the individual to the global (de Haas, 2010). Understanding these determinants is crucial for grasping why migration, particularly irregular migration, persists despite its inherent risks. The literature broadly classifies migration determinants into economic, social, political, environmental, and policy/legal factors. Each set plays a unique and often overlapping role in shaping migration aspirations and capabilities.

2.6.1 Economic Determinants

Economic considerations are widely recognized as the primary drivers of migration (de Haas, 2010; Massey et al., 1993). The differential in income levels, employment opportunities, and quality of life between origin and destination areas creates a powerful incentive for individuals and households to migrate (Castles et al., 2014; de Haas, 2010). In many low-income countries, chronic unemployment, underemployment, and limited access to productive resources such as land and credit generate structural poverty that ‘pushes’ individuals out of their communities (Bezu & Holden, 2014; IOM, 2024).

For irregular migration specifically, economic determinants are especially significant. When legal migration channels are inaccessible due to costs, quota limits, or restrictive visa regimes, prospective migrants with urgent financial needs may resort to irregular routes facilitated by smugglers and informal networks (IOM, 2019; Koser, 2010). For example, Ethiopian migrants aspiring to work in the Gulf countries often face high fees for recruitment agencies and visa processing. In the absence of affordable and transparent pathways, many choose irregular migration despite risks of exploitation and abuse (Keleme Work et al., 2017).

2.6.2 Social Determinants

Social factors such as family dynamics, peer influence, community norms, and existing diaspora networks strongly shape migration decisions. The presence of family members or friends in destination countries provides critical support, information, and financial assistance that lowers migration costs and risks (de Haas, 2010; Massey et al., 1993). Migration becomes a social norm in certain communities, where it is embedded as a strategy for economic advancement and social mobility (Beauchemin, 2011).

Social pressures, such as expectations to contribute remittances or improve household status, can compel individuals to migrate even if they harbour uncertain feelings about leaving (Bakewell, 2010). This dynamic is particularly evident in Ethiopia, where migration is often regarded as a rite of passage and a demonstration of personal success (Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, 2014). Such social determinants can encourage risk-taking behaviours and reliance on irregular migration pathways if regular options are unavailable or inadequate.

2.6.3 Political and Security Determinants

Political instability, conflict, persecution, and state repression represent powerful ‘push’ factors, driving forced and irregular migration flows. Wars and violent conflicts displace millions, often forcing individuals to flee without documents or the ability to pursue legal migration (Castles et al., 2014). State fragility and governance failures also undermine economic and social systems, compounding vulnerabilities and migration pressures.

In contexts like northern Ethiopia, the 2020 Tigray conflict created acute displacement and migration dynamics. The breakdown of law and order, destruction of livelihoods, and human rights abuses precipitated mass outflows via irregular routes (ACAPS, 2021b). Such political determinants are frequently intertwined with economic hardship, creating complex migration drivers that cannot be addressed through migration policy alone.

2.6.4 Environmental Determinants

Environmental degradation, climate variability, and natural disasters have increasingly been recognized as critical migration drivers, particularly in vulnerable rural communities dependent on agriculture (Black et al., 2011). Desertification, soil erosion, drought, and floods undermine livelihoods and food security, leading to seasonal and permanent migration (Afifi, 2011).

Environmental factors often interact with economic and social determinants to amplify migration pressures. In Ethiopia, recurrent droughts in the northern and eastern highlands have degraded agricultural productivity, pushing rural populations toward migration as a survival strategy (Bezu & Holden, 2014). Yet, environmental migrants frequently face legal invisibility under international protection frameworks, leaving them vulnerable to irregular migration pathways when formal asylum or migration channels do not exist.

2.6.5 Policy and Legal Determinants

Restrictive immigration policies, limited legal migration avenues, and migration management failures constitute significant determinants of irregular migration (Koser, 2010). Tightened border controls and visa restrictions in many destination countries limit opportunities for low-skilled workers from developing countries to migrate legally, inadvertently fuelling irregular movements (Castles et al., 2014).

Migration policies often fail to account for labor market demands or humanitarian realities, creating gaps between supply and demand. This mismatch encourages migrants to circumvent legal barriers through irregular channels (de Haas, 2010). Furthermore, weak governance, corruption, and lack of oversight over recruitment agencies exacerbate exploitation and increase irregular migration flows (MoLSA, 2014).

For example, in Ethiopia, despite efforts to regulate migration through bilateral agreements and formal recruitment processes, many migrants are compelled to rely on informal brokers and smugglers due to delays, costs, or distrust in official systems (Keleme Work et al., 2017). The absence of comprehensive protections for migrant workers abroad also discourages legal migration and increases vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation.

Generally, the determinants of migration and irregular migration are deeply intertwined and operate across multiple dimensions and scales. Economic deprivation, social networks, political instability, environmental pressures, and restrictive policies collectively shape migration aspirations and capacities. Irregular migration emerges primarily where legal options

are inaccessible or inadequate, and where socio-political conditions incentivize risk-taking despite known dangers. Effective policy interventions thus require multi-sectoral and multi-level approaches addressing root causes, improving legal pathways, and strengthening protections for migrants.

2.7 Impacts of migration

The impact of migration has two dimensions such as in the side of hosting and home country.

2.7.1 Impact on the hosting country

Immigrants allow an economy to work more smoothly by filling vacancies across the jobs spectrum, at both the top and bottom social strata (IOM, 2024; Noja et al., 2018; Sergievskaya, 2021). A common complaint is that immigrants move to richer countries to exploit public services. In fact, the vast majority of migrants only want to work as hard as possible. The situation is certainly typical for illegal immigrants since they want to conceal their presence and avoid contact with the authorities.

Unlike commonly believed, around half of the official international migration from the south is to other developing countries rather than wealthier countries in the north (Ratha & Shaw, 2007). And official statistics likely underreport south-south migration, especially between contiguous countries because of lack of border controls; almost 80% of the south-south migration is estimated to take place between countries with contiguous borders (Crawley & Teye, 2024).

2.7.2 Impact on the home country

A possible benefit of migration for the sending countries might be easing of population unemployment pressures. The other idea is that migration might bring financial benefits to the sending communities but it can also be socially disruptive (IOM, 2024; Sergievskaya, 2021). Migration is a decision that impacts the welfare of the household, the home community, and in the end the whole economy in various ways. The welfare implications of migration on the origin country are most often, though not always, sizable and positive. The main channels through which migration alleviates poverty are increased incomes from remittances, ability to smooth consumption, access to finance for starting a new business, as well as tapping on to the knowledge and resources provided by the international community of the migrant diaspora. Besides pure monetary gains, migration and remittances allow for higher investment in health care and education. Yet, not all impacts are positive: exploitation of migrants by unscrupulous

recruiters or employers is reportedly widespread; separation from family can be stressful for migrants; and large scale immigration can pose serious challenges to a nation's identity and sovereignty (Ghosh & Weinstein, 2021; Sergievskaya, 2021).

2.7.3 Economic impacts

While migration has economic, social, and cultural implications for the sending and host societies, remittances the migrants send home are perhaps the most tangible and least controversial link between migration and development (IOM, 2024; Kuschminder & Siegel, 2014; Ratha & Shaw, 2007). According to the official estimates, migrants from developing countries sent over \$445 billion to their origin countries in 2023 (IOM, 2024). The true size of remittances including unrecorded flows through formal and informal channels is likely to be even higher. While remittances to developing countries declined modestly in 2009 because of the global financial crisis, these flows have remained resilient compared to private capital flows, and have become even more important as a source of external financing in many developing countries. Migration and remittances have both direct and indirect effects on the welfare of the population in the migrant sending countries. Global evidences suggests that remittances reduce the depth and severity of poverty, as well as indirectly stimulate economic activity (Ghosh & Weinstein, 2021; Noja et al., 2018; World Bank, 2022).

Moreover, as IOM study estimate, emigrants from Africa will send over \$445 billion to their origin country (IOM, 2024). The true size of remittance including unrecorded flows through formal and informal channel is great, the formal channel encompasses such interdisciplinary like western union, commercial bank and other similar institutions. The informal channel refers to such network as the *hawala* system explains in the Middle East. The informal channel is generally cheaper than the formal channel and are not more capable of delivering money quickly to rural and remote areas is likely to be even higher.

Most of the studies indicate that migration is primarily motivated by economic factors. In developing countries, low agricultural income, agricultural unemployment and underemployment are considered basic factors pushing the migrants towards developed area with greater job opportunities (Carling & Collins, 2017; de Haas, 2021; Ellis, 1998; Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009; IOM, 2024). Thus, almost all studies agree that most of migrants have moved in search of better economic opportunities.

2.7.4 Social impacts

Migration, both voluntary and forced, has profound social implications for individuals, families, and societies across origin, transit, and destination countries. These impacts are multifaceted, influencing social cohesion, identity, integration, and inequality.

Social Cohesion and Integration

In destination countries, migration can enrich cultural diversity and foster innovation, but it also presents challenges for social cohesion. Successful integration depends on inclusive policies, language acquisition, and access to education and employment (Jaumotte et al., 2016). When integration fails, migrants may face social exclusion, discrimination, and limited civic participation, which can exacerbate tensions between native and migrant populations (Noja et al., 2018).

Family and Community Dynamics

Migration alters family structures, often leading to transnational families where members are separated across borders. While remittances can improve living standards in origin countries, prolonged separation may strain relationships and affect children's well-being (World Bank, 2023). In some contexts, migration empowers women through increased autonomy and income, but it can also expose them to vulnerabilities, especially in irregular migration scenarios (UNHCR, 2025).

Identity and Belonging

Migrants frequently navigate complex identities, balancing cultural heritage with adaptation to new environments. This duality can foster resilience but may also lead to identity conflicts, particularly among second-generation migrants (IOM, 2024). Host societies may struggle with accepting multiculturalism, leading to polarized debates around national identity and immigration.

Inequality and Social Mobility

Migration can reduce poverty and enhance social mobility for migrants and their families. However, irregular migrants often face precarious living conditions, limited access to services, and exploitation, reinforcing social inequalities (UNHCR, 2025). In origin countries, emigration may deepen regional disparities, especially when skilled youth leave under unequal conditions (Ghosh & Weinstein, 2021).

2.7.5 Cultural impacts

Migration is not only a demographic and economic phenomenon; it is a powerful driver of cultural transformation. As people move across borders, they carry languages, traditions, beliefs, and social norms that reshape both host and origin societies. These cultural exchanges can foster diversity, innovation, and mutual understanding, but they may also generate tensions around identity, integration, and belonging.

Cultural Enrichment and Hybridization

Migrants contribute to cultural pluralism by introducing new cuisines, art forms, languages, and religious practices. This cultural hybridization enriches host societies, promoting creativity and intercultural dialogue (IOM, 2024). Cities like London, Toronto, and Nairobi exemplify how migrant communities have transformed urban cultural landscapes through festivals, media, and entrepreneurship.

Identity and Belonging

Migration often prompts individuals to renegotiate their identities. Migrants may experience dual or transnational identities, balancing heritage with adaptation to new cultural norms (World Bank, 2023). While this can foster resilience and global citizenship, it may also lead to identity conflicts, especially among second-generation migrants navigating cultural expectations from both home and host societies (UNHCR, 2025).

Social Tensions and Xenophobia

Cultural differences can sometimes trigger social tensions, particularly when integration policies are weak or public discourse stigmatizes migrants. Xenophobia and cultural stereotyping may emerge, undermining social cohesion and marginalizing migrant communities (Jaumotte et al., 2016). Inclusive education, media representation, and community engagement are critical to countering these effects.

Cultural Impacts on Origin Countries

Migration also affects origin countries culturally. Diaspora communities often maintain strong ties through remittances, cultural events, and digital platforms, influencing local norms and aspirations. However, the emigration of youth and skilled professionals may lead to cultural shifts, including the erosion of traditional practices and languages (Ghosh & Weinstein, 2021).

2.7.6 Health related impacts

Migration significantly influences health outcomes for individuals and communities across origin, transit, and destination countries. While migration can offer access to improved healthcare and living conditions, it also introduces vulnerabilities, especially for irregular and forcibly displaced populations.

Health Vulnerabilities and Barriers

Migrants often face elevated health risks due to precarious living conditions, limited access to healthcare, and exposure to trauma during transit. Irregular migrants and asylum seekers may avoid seeking medical care due to fear of deportation or legal repercussions, resulting in untreated physical and mental health conditions (Abubakar et al., 2018). Language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of insurance further hinder access to services in host countries (Rechel et al., 2013).

Mental Health and Forced Displacement

Forced migration due to conflict or persecution is strongly associated with mental health challenges. Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) frequently experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety, often exacerbated by prolonged uncertainty and inadequate psychosocial support (Silove et al., 2017). The 2024 UNHCR Global Trends report highlights that over 123 million people were forcibly displaced, with children comprising nearly 40%, a group particularly vulnerable to long-term psychological effects (UNHCR, 2025).

Public Health and Host Communities

Migration can influence public health dynamics, including disease surveillance, vaccination coverage, and health system capacity. While concerns about migrants spreading disease are often unfounded, gaps in preventive care and overcrowded conditions can pose risks to both migrants and host populations (Abubakar et al., 2018). Inclusive health policies and culturally competent care are essential to mitigate these risks and promote health equity.

Positive Contributions and Remittances

Despite challenges, migration can improve health outcomes through remittances that support nutrition, medical care, and education in origin countries. Migrants also contribute to health

systems as caregivers and medical professionals, particularly in aging societies facing labor shortages (World Bank, 2023).

2.8 Global and Regional Trends of Irregular Migration

Irregular migration has become one of the most pressing and complex phenomena in contemporary global mobility. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024), in 2020 there were approximately 281 million international migrants worldwide, accounting for 3.6% of the global population. Among these, irregular migrants, those residing or traveling without proper authorization, are estimated to constitute 15-20% of the total migrant population. This sizable cohort reflects broader geopolitical and socio-economic dynamics, including the tightening of border controls, economic inequalities, conflict, and environmental degradation.

2.8.1 Major Corridors and Routes for Irregular Migration

Irregular migration is concentrated along several key corridors shaped by geographic proximity, historical linkages, and economic differentials. In the Americas, migrants from Central and South America undertake perilous journeys through Mexico to reach the United States. These routes traverse harsh deserts and are plagued by organized crime, human trafficking, and exposure to violence and exploitation (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2019). The tightening of U.S. immigration policies and increased border enforcement have, paradoxically, increased the reliance on smuggling networks and dangerous crossing points (Chavez, 2013).

In the Mediterranean region, irregular migrants primarily originate from North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of the Middle East. They often embark from Libya, Tunisia, or Egypt in overcrowded boats aiming to reach Southern Europe, especially Italy, Spain, and Greece (UNHCR, 2023). This route has gained notoriety for its high mortality rates; thousands of migrants drown annually attempting the crossing, highlighting the humanitarian crisis underpinning irregular migration (IOM, 2024).

In the Middle East, labor migration is a significant driver, with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar hosting large populations of foreign workers (IOM, 2024). Irregular migration in this context often arises from restrictive sponsorship systems (Kafala), limited legal channels for certain worker categories, and exploitative recruitment practices (HRW, 2018). Women migrating as domestic workers, many of whom enter irregularly or lose legal status due to visa violations or contract

termination, face heightened risks of abuse and trafficking (IOM, 2024; Koser, 2010; Tefera, 2018).

2.9 Emerging Risks and Challenges

Irregular migrants frequently face exploitation, abuse, and lack of access to basic services. Vulnerabilities are particularly acute for women and unaccompanied minors, who are susceptible to sexual violence, forced labor, and trafficking (UNODC, 2021a, 2021b). Migrants often spend prolonged periods in transit countries, enduring detention, extortion, and inadequate protection (Sweileh, 2023). Furthermore, xenophobic attitudes and restrictive integration policies in destination countries contribute to social exclusion and marginalization (Esses et al., 2017; Jaumotte et al., 2016).

Climate change is increasingly recognized as an indirect driver of irregular migration. While displacement due to sudden disasters is sometimes classified as forced migration, slow-onset events such as desertification and sea-level rise undermine livelihoods, forcing people to migrate irregularly in search of alternative opportunities (Black et al., 2011). However, international legal frameworks remain ill-equipped to protect environmental migrants, leaving many vulnerable to irregular status.

2.10 Migration in the Ethiopian Context

Ethiopia's migration dynamics are deeply embedded in its socio-economic and political landscape, shaped by structural inequalities, agrarian livelihoods, ethnic federalism, and recurrent environmental shocks. As the second most populous country in Africa, Ethiopia is a source, transit, and destination country for migrants (Bezu & Holden, 2014; Ezra & Kiros, 2001; Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009). Migration patterns are not monolithic; rather, they reflect a complex web of rural-to-urban movements, cross-border labor migration, displacement due to conflict, and irregular migration driven by poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunities (Girmachew Adugna, 2019; Bekele & Zeleke, 2021; Busza et al., 2023; Fernandez, 2020; Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009).

2.10.1 Internal Migration Dynamics

Internal migration is a dominant form of mobility in Ethiopia. It includes rural-to-urban, rural-to-rural, and urban-to-urban flows. Rural-to-urban migration is especially pronounced among youth seeking education, employment, and better access to services. Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Bahir Dar, and Mekelle are among the primary urban centres attracting internal migrants

(Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009). A key driver of rural outmigration is land fragmentation due to population growth, which results in diminishing agricultural productivity and increasing livelihood insecurity (Bekele & Zeleke, 2021; Bezu & Holden, 2014).

Seasonal and circular migration also plays a critical role in Ethiopia's internal mobility. Many young people, especially from Amhara, Tigray, and Oromia regions, temporarily move to other areas for agricultural labor during harvest periods. These movements help households diversify income and manage risks, though they often occur in informal and precarious labor markets (World Bank, 2022).

The consequences of internal migration are spatially uneven. While it may relieve demographic pressure in rural areas and foster remittance flows, it also places strain on urban infrastructure and public services. Moreover, without adequate planning and social protection, internal migrants often end up in informal settlements, engaging in low-wage, insecure employment with limited upward mobility (Bezu & Holden, 2014).

2.10.2 International Migration Patterns

International migration from Ethiopia is shaped by historical labor mobility, conflict-induced displacement, and transnational networks. Traditionally, Ethiopian migrants have moved to neighbouring countries such as Sudan and Kenya, as well as to the Middle East and, more recently, to Europe and North America. Labor migration to the Middle East, particularly for domestic and construction work, has increased significantly since the 1990s (IOM, 2024; World Bank, 2022).

Women constitute a large share of international migrants, especially those traveling to Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE as domestic workers. Migration is often arranged through informal brokers and is motivated by expectations of better income, despite the potential for exploitative working conditions. Migration policies in Ethiopia, such as temporary bans on labor migration, have been inconsistently enforced and often have the unintended effect of increasing irregular migration (MoLSA, 2014).

The remittances sent by Ethiopian migrants are vital to the national economy and household livelihoods. According to the World Bank (2021), remittance inflows amounted to over \$5 billion annually, making them one of the largest sources of foreign exchange. However, dependency on remittances can also entrench migration as a survival strategy, perpetuating cycles of mobility.

2.11 Irregular Migration and Challenges

Irregular migration from Ethiopia remains a major concern. It includes unauthorized border crossings, overstaying of visas, and travel via smuggling networks. The Gulf States are the primary destination for Ethiopian irregular migrants, many of whom enter without proper documentation. A significant portion are young women recruited through informal channels, facing high vulnerability to labor exploitation, trafficking, and abuse (Mekonnen & Estefanos, 2012).

The irregular nature of migration is fuelled by limited access to legal migration pathways, weak institutional oversight, and socio-cultural expectations that valorise migration success. Smuggling networks operate along routes to Sudan, Libya, and Yemen, often exposing migrants to severe risks including detention, physical abuse, and death. Migrants also face challenges in destination countries, including lack of labor protections, xenophobia, and isolation (Mulugeta, 2016).

Government efforts to combat irregular migration have included anti-trafficking legislation, public awareness campaigns, bilateral labor agreements, and regulation of recruitment agencies. However, enforcement remains inconsistent and is hampered by corruption, limited resources, and lack of coordination among stakeholders (Keleme Work et al., 2017).

Migration from Ethiopia, both regular and irregular, is deeply rooted in structural factors that require a multi-faceted policy response. Addressing the drivers and consequences of irregular migration necessitates not only legal and diplomatic measures but also rural development, employment generation, and social protection systems.

2.12 Migration in Northern Ethiopia and Post-Conflict Dynamics

The northern regions of Ethiopia, particularly Tigray, Amhara, and parts of Afar, have experienced dramatic increases in forced and irregular migration since the outbreak of conflict in 2020. The conflict led to massive internal displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and social instability (Suleimenova et al., 2022). In Tigray alone, over 2 million people were displaced, with thousands more fleeing to Sudan and other neighbouring countries (ACAPS, 2021b).

Post-conflict migration in northern Ethiopia reflects both traditional migration patterns and new dynamics. Young people from conflict-affected zones seek to escape poverty and insecurity, often taking dangerous irregular routes to the Middle East or North Africa.

Migration has become both a coping mechanism and a perceived path to a better future (G. Adugna, 2019; Zekarias, 2023).

Unlike previous waves dominated by male labor migrants, recent migration from northern Ethiopia includes significant numbers of women, children, and elderly seeking refuge (G. Adugna, 2019; Zekarias, 2023). The collapse of governance structures has allowed smuggling networks and armed groups to flourish, controlling key transit points such as Raya Alamata and Kobo.

Migrants often travel through dangerous routes, facing exploitation, detention, and violence, with limited access to humanitarian assistance (Mulugeta, 2016). The protracted nature of the conflict and ongoing instability limit options for return or local integration, increasing reliance on irregular migration pathways.

Furthermore, the erosion of local governance structures and humanitarian services in post-conflict zones creates a vacuum in migration management. Smuggling networks have capitalized on this context, exploiting the desperation of individuals and families. Gender-based violence, family separation, and psychosocial trauma are widespread among those on the move (ACAPS, 2021b; Tronvoll, 2022).

The situation in northern Ethiopia illustrates the nexus between conflict, displacement, and irregular migration. International humanitarian and migration actors have called for enhanced protection mechanisms, including safe migration pathways, improved border management with human rights safeguards, and targeted assistance for vulnerable groups (UNHCR, 2023). The need to integrate conflict-sensitive approaches into migration policy is paramount to address both immediate protection needs and long-term developmental challenges (De Waal, 2018).

CHAPTER 3 -

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Description of the Study Area

3.1.1 Location and topography

Alamata, the administrative capital of Raya Alamata district, is located 600km north of Addis Ababa and about 180km south of Mekelle, the Tigray Regional State capital. The district is located at the southern tip of Tigray bordering Amhara Regional state. The main road from Addis Ababa to Mekelle crosses Raya Alamata.

Raya Alamata, one of the districts in Tigray region, is found between 12°15'11" to 12°33'56" North latitude, and 39°14'34.6" to 39°45'49" East longitude. The district is bounded by Ofla district in the north and North West, Raya-Azebo district in the northeast, Chercher district the east, and Amhara region particularly Kobo district in the south. The area extends 34.3km and 57.2km north south and east west respectively.

3.1.2 Topography and Climate

As to Gebrehiwot et al. (2024), Raya Alamata features three distinct agro-ecological zones: temperate (locally known as *degua*), subtropical (locally known as *woyna degua*), and tropical (*kola*). The temperate zone, situated above 2400 meters above sea level (m.a.s.l.), covers 9% of the area. The subtropical zone, ranging between 1600 and 2400 m.a.s.l., accounts for 46% of the district. The tropical zone, below 1600 m.a.s.l., comprises 45% of the district. Elevation in Raya Alamata generally increases from the south and east towards the west and north. Raya Alamata experiences a bimodal rainfall pattern, with the main summer rainfall (*kiremti* - JJAS) contributing 53% of the annual average precipitation, preceded by the smaller spring rainfall (*belgi* - FMAM). The mean annual rainfall is approximately 650 mm, and the average temperature ranges from 16°C to 27°C (Gebrehiwot et al., 2024).

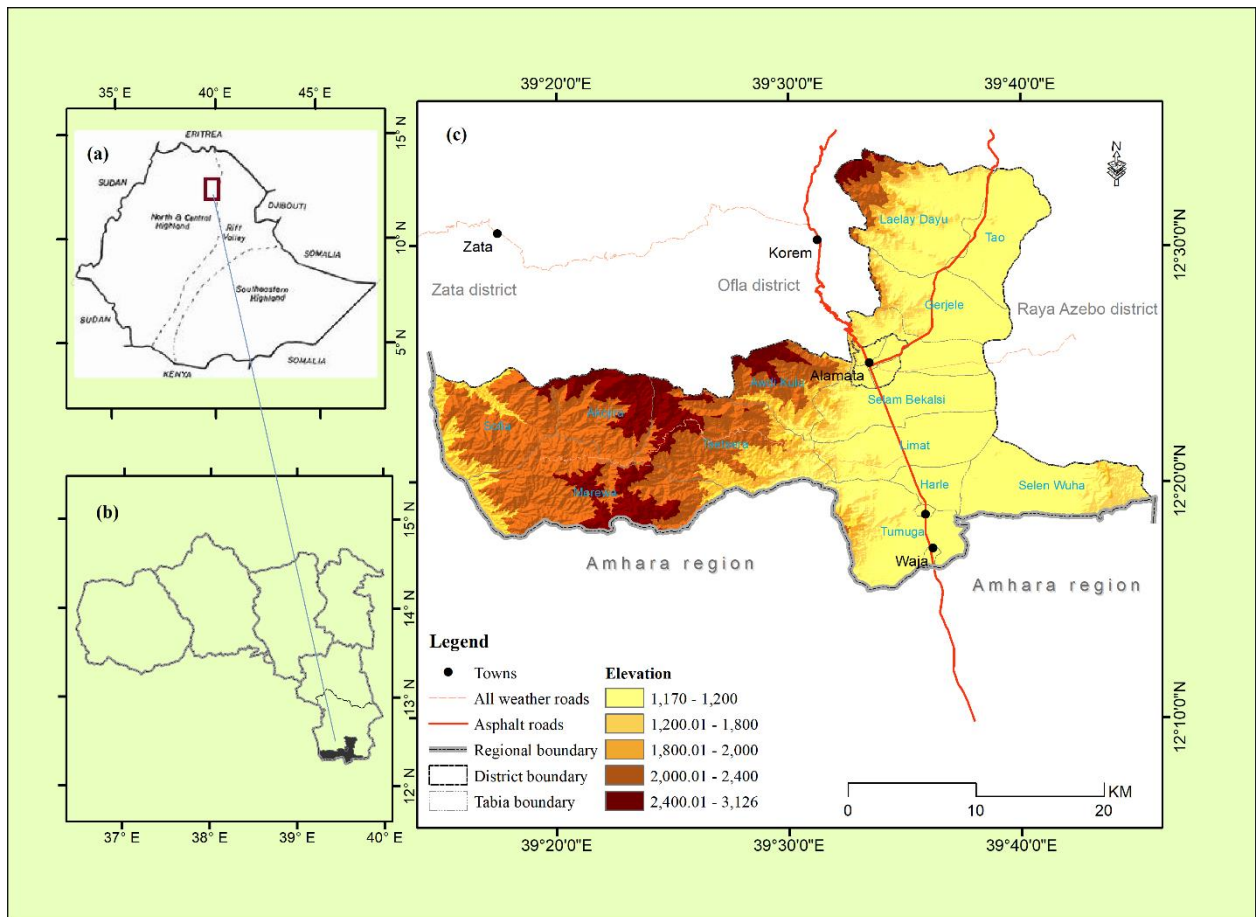


Figure 3-1: location of the study area, a) Ethiopia b) Tigray region with the study area highlighted and c) Raya Alamata and its lower administrations and topography and transport network in background

3.1.3 Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics of the study area

The total population of the study area is 95,094 (49.4% M and 50.6% F). The majority of the people depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Farming is mixed composed of smallholder subsistence crop farming (crops and vegetables) and livestock production. Crop production is the most important economic sector of the study area mainly depends on rain feed agriculture and characterized by cereal dominant cropping with livestock as a component. The process of farming in the study area involves mainly by human labor and oxen. The main crop in the study area includes sorghum, maize and *teff*. Among these crops, sorghum and *teff* are widely produced in the area and supply to the local market as well as the other districts of the regional state of Tigray. In the area there is cultivating of different vegetables and crops by using small irrigation; such as orange, banana, avocado, mango, coffee, apple, pepper, papaya, onion and tomato.

Farmers in the study area follow mixed agriculture in which livestock production is an important component. They are the major assets of household and play an important role in the crop production. The major livestock type in the study area includes oxen, cow, goat, sheep, calves, heifer, donkey, and camel. Most of these are the source of income for the livelihood of society in the study area (Gebrehiwot et al., 2024).

3.2 Research Design

The research combined both qualitative and quantitative research approaches depending on the requirements of the specific objectives. The study employed both probability and non-probability sampling techniques. There were two sample groups from which primary data were gathered. The first group of household members comprised of 204 sample size were selected randomly, and data related to experience of migration, perception benefits, challenges, tendency to migrate, factors determining migration experiences of households and others were gathered from this group using structured questionnaire. The second group containing 12 returnees, 12 sending families for Key Informants Interview (KII), and 8 migrant families and 8 local elders or *abo gereb* for Focus Group Discussions (*FGD*) were selected purposefully to explore data related to experience, challenges and risks, patterns, processes and routes of irregular migration. Sending families were sources of data related to challenges and risks they faced while their family members were on the course of crossing boundaries to Saudi Arabia.

The research followed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative research approach is important in getting in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons that influence such behaviour. It also enables to examine various social settings and individuals' attitudes, behaviours and experiences, and allow sharing the understandings and perceptions of others, and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives and make sense of others.

On the other side, the quantitative research approach, is important in analysing the various socio-economic, political, environmental and institutional factors influencing migration behaviours of households or their members.

3.3 Data collection methods and sources

Based on the research objectives, both primary and secondary data sources were use in the study. Using different data collection strategies is more advantageous than single data collection strategy in a research work.

3.3.1 Sources of data

Both primary and secondary data sources were consulted for this study. The primary data were collected from 204 sample households through survey questionnaire. In addition to this, the study was supported by focus group discussions (FDGs) and in-depth interviews with key informants such as migrants/s, sending families and elderlies (*abo gereb*). Whereas, the secondary data were obtained from different published and unpublished reports.

3.3.2 Data collection instruments

To obtain sufficient information, different data collection instruments were used. These major instruments include questionnaire, FDGs, key informant interviews, and document analysis.

Questionnaires

The primary data about the respondents' socio-economic, demographic, and physical factors which effect the migrant, benefits and challenges of sending families in the study area were collected through questionnaire. The questionnaires include semi-structured questions that contain both close and open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were employed to use the respondents' own words while answering the questions. All of the questionnaire were prepared first in English and then translated in to local language before distributed to the respondents.

Key Informants Interview (KIIs)

The research made in-depth interview with informants that were selected purposely. This instrument helps in getting in depth meaning and substantiating the survey data. The in-depth interviews were conducted with the 12 migrant returnees and 12 sending families.

Focus Group Discussions (FDGs)

FDGs were made with local elderlies (*abo gereb*) and returned migrants composed of 8 members each.

3.4 Target Population

The target population of this study was the population of Raya Alamata district. However, as lower administrative units, called *tabias*, divide the community, the sample size considered three *tabias* namely *waja-timuga* town, *selen wuha* and rural *timuga*. It is from these lower administrative units the sample population for the survey and in-depth interview selected.

There is no exact population figure of the three administrative units for recent years. A projected population data from Tigray Region Plan and Finance Bureau (2009) shows that the three administrative units had a total of 26,373 population in about 5,861 households. Since there is no recent population data for the 2024/25, we applied a population projection using the 2009 population data as a base population, an annual growth rate of 1.9255% (World Bank, 2024) and the compound projection method to get population and households of the study area for 2024. The compound projection method is the most accurate method of population projection mostly used by official statistics agencies like the Ethiopian Central Statistics Agency (CSA).

The compound projection method is calculated as:

$$P_{2024} = P_{2009} \times (1 + r)^t$$

Where: P_{2024} is the projected of 2024, P_{2009} is the base year population, r is the annual rate of growth and t is the number of years.

The projected population has been presented below:

Table 3-1: Population sizes of the three study areas projected using the compound projection method

Tabia	2009			2024			Growth rate
	M	F	T	M	F	T	
Waja Temuga Town	2,385	2,753	5,138	3,175	3665	6840	1.9255%
Selen Wuha	5,896	5,723	11,619	7,849	7619	15467	
Timuga	4,769	4,847	9,616	6,348	6453	12801	
Total	13,050	13,323	26,373	17,372	17,736	35,108	

Once we captured the population of the year 2024, we convert the population of each administrative unit into households using the average household size of Tigray region, 4.6 (CSA, 2007). The household size of each tabia is presented in Table 3-2 below.

Table 3-2. Projected household size of the study areas in Raya Alamata

Tabia	Household size	Sample size	Percent
Waja Temuga Town	1487	81	5.45
Selen Wuha	3362	60	2.0
Timuga	2783	63	2.3
Total	7632	204	2.7

The proposed survey sample size was 370 households, calculated at a 95% confidence level with a 4.9% margin of error. However, fieldwork faced significant security challenges, particularly in kebelles along the border between Raya Alamata and Kobo districts, where moving between homes and interviewing people was perceived as highly sensitive by militant groups. These conditions restricted mobility and direct engagement with households, leading to a curtailed data collection process. Ultimately, the final dataset comprised 204 households for the survey, complemented by 40 participants in KIIs and FGDs, yielding a total sample of 244 respondents.

Due to the reduced survey size, the effective 95% margin of error for proportion estimates (at $p = 0.5$) increased from 4.9% to approximately 6.8%. This level of precision, however, remains well within the generally acceptable range of 5–10% in social science research.

3.5 Sampling Technique and Procedures

The research employed both probability and non-probability sampling techniques as stated above. The non-probability sampling units were those migrants and sending families selected purposively. Whereas, the probability sampling units were members of the larger community selected randomly. These units combined both households who have, and do not have migration experience. The study, as presented above, carried out a survey of 204 randomly selected households. In addition, 12 purposefully selected migrant returnee and 12 migrant families for Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and 16 members of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) from sending families and local elders (*aba gereb*) were consulted. Had it not been to the intensified and prolonged armed conflict in and around the study area, it would have been possible to include more respondents in the survey and qualitative data collection processes.

3.6 Methods of Data Analysis

This study applied both qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques to capture the complexity of irregular migration. A mixed-methods approach was adopted because migration is a multidimensional process involving not only structural factors but also lived human experiences. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) emphasize, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches allows researchers to build a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Similarly, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) argue that mixed methods help address research questions that are too complex for a single approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

On the quantitative side, descriptive techniques such as tables, figures, and ratios were used to summarize patterns of household characteristics, migration histories, and perceived risks. Correlation analysis was further applied to examine associations between socio-demographic, economic, and environmental factors and migration experiences. Such approaches are widely used in migration research to identify drivers and risk factors that influence mobility decisions (Bilsborrow, 2016; de Haas, 2010).

At the same time, qualitative analysis was undertaken using data from key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). These narratives provided depth and context to the quantitative results, revealing the ways migrants and their families make sense of risks, abuses, and coping strategies. Maxwell (2013) highlights those qualitative methods are particularly valuable in sensitive topics such as migration because they give voice to participants' experiences (Maxwell, 2013), while Bryman (2016) stresses that triangulation enhances validity by cross-checking findings from different sources (Bryman, 2016).

By integrating these two strands of analysis, the study was able to balance breadth with depth. Quantitative results established the scale and associations of migration patterns, while qualitative insights brought to light the human realities behind the numbers. This triangulation not only increased the credibility of the findings but also ensured that the study reflected both the structural drivers of irregular migration and the lived experiences of those directly affected (Greene et al., 1989).

3.7 Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was granted through the department PG committee before starting data collection and analysis. We employed all the ethical principles throughout the interaction with people directly and indirectly participating in the study. We have protected the privacy of the participants that anticipate the possibility of potential risks which may appear following their contact with the researchers in interview. While administrating the research, we informed the purpose and confidentiality of the research and asked the consent of respondents and interview and discussion participants in gathering data. Unless they give us their consent, no data collection procedure was administrated.

CHAPTER 4 –

4 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Background of Respondents

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents provides essential context for understanding household behavior, particularly in relation to economic livelihoods, migration, and rural development. The survey encompasses 204 households, with data offering insights into age, gender, marital status, household size, education, occupation, income, landholding, and livestock ownership.

Age and Gender Distribution

Table 4-1: Age and gender distribution of respondents

Age of respondents	Frequency	Percent
15-25	53	26.37
26-35	51	25.37
36-45	43	21.39
46-55	35	17.41
56-65	15	7.46
65+	4	1.99
Gender of respondents		
Female	73	35.8
Male	131	64.2
Total	204	100

Source: Survey results, 2025

Table 4-1 shows, the age of respondents ranges from 15 to 78 years, with a notable concentration in the 20–50 age group, which constitutes the economically active population. The average age falls around the early 30s, aligning with findings that younger heads are more likely to be involved in both agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods (Bezu & Holden, 2014). Gender-wise, 64.2% of respondents are male, while 35.8% are female, reflecting persistent gender imbalances in land ownership, decision-making, and labor roles in many rural contexts (FAO, 2011).

Marital Status and Household Size

Table 4-2: Marital status of respondents and their Household size

Marital Status	Frequency	Percent
Not married	57	27.9
Married	113	55.4
Divorced	23	11.3
Widowed	11	5.4
Total	204	100

Household size		
1--2	44	23.53
3--4	64	34.22
5--6	36	19.25
7--8	29	15.51
8+	14	7.49
Total	187	100.00

Source: Survey results

Table 4-2 shows, the majority of respondents are married (55.4%), while 27.9% are unmarried, and the remaining are divorced, widowed, or unspecified. Household size varies significantly, ranging from single-person to 12-member households, with the most common being 4 members (21.3%). Larger households often indicate a greater labor pool, but can also represent higher consumption needs, influencing decisions on migration, income diversification, and land use (de Brauw et al., 2014).

Education Levels

Educational attainment among respondents is varied. Approximately 21.5% have no formal education, while 31.8% have primary education, and nearly a quarter (24.1%) hold college-level education or higher, see Table 4-3. Education is widely recognized as a key determinant of economic opportunity and migration potential; higher education often correlates with access to non-farm employment and increased aspirations for urban or international mobility (Volante & Klinger, 2023).

Table 4-3: Educational background of respondents

Education background	Frequency	Percent
No education	42	21.5
Primary education	62	31.8
Secondary education	44	22.6
College and above	47	24.1
Total	195	100

Source: Survey results

Occupation and Income

Farming is the dominant occupation, representing 41.7% of respondents. A smaller portion is involved in trading (10.3%), teaching (9.3%), and a variety of mixed occupations including driving, carpentry, and private business. About 5.4% reported no defined occupation, while 2.5% identified as frequent migrants, highlighting how migration may serve as an adaptive livelihood strategy.

Income levels are widely dispersed. While some households earn below 1,000 ETB/month, a significant proportion earn 4,000–10,000 ETB, and a few outliers report earnings greater than that. However, only 132 respondents (64.7%) provided income data, pointing to potential data sensitivity or variability in income reporting. Research in rural Ethiopia indicates that income diversification through non-farm and off-farm work is increasingly critical for household resilience (Berhe, 2023; Tesgera et al., 2024).

Land and Livestock Assets

Among the 113 households that reported landholding data, the average plot size ranges from 0 to 8 *timad*, with 2 *timad* being the most common (25.7%), in Table 4-4. This is below national averages and may be insufficient for sustaining families, especially in contexts of land fragmentation and declining soil fertility (Jayne et al., 2014). Fertility assessments, though limited to 81 respondents, indicate that 42% consider their land fertile, while 11.1% view it as infertile.

Table 4-4: Landholding size of respondents in Raya-Alamata

land size (<i>timad</i>)	Frequency	Percent
0	123	60.29
.5-2	47	23.04
3-4	19	9.31
> 4	15	7.35
	204	100.00

Source: Survey results

Livestock ownership data suggest smallholder characteristics. Of the respondents who provided information, most own 1–2 oxen, 1–3 cows, and very few own goats, sheep, or chickens in significant numbers. Livestock remains a key asset, acting as both a savings mechanism and a buffer during economic shocks (Banda & Tanganyika, 2021; Berhe, 2023).

Generally, the above result shows a picture of a predominantly rural population with mixed access to land, education, and income opportunities. Farming remains the backbone of livelihoods, but income diversity and non-farm employment are essential for many. Educational variation and land access disparities suggest uneven development, and the gender gap remains prominent in terms of economic roles. As supported by empirical studies, rural households are increasingly reliant on migration, education, and diversification to navigate economic uncertainty and climate variability (Bezu & Holden, 2014; de Haas, 2010).

4.2 Migration Dynamics in Raya Alamata

Migration from Ethiopia, particularly to the Gulf countries, has become a significant socio-economic and demographic phenomenon over the past decades. The dynamics of this migration are shaped by a complex interplay of economic hardship, social expectations, aspirations for a better life, and structural deficiencies in local labor markets. This section analyses the migration experiences, behaviours, and patterns of households in the study area, using both quantitative survey results and qualitative insights from KIIs and FGDs.

4.2.1 Household-Level Migration Incidence

Table 4-5: Whether household members migrated to Gulf countries

	Frequency	Percent
No	72	35.3
Yes	131	64.2
	203	100.0

Source: Survey results

The survey data shows that 64.5% of the respondents in the sample reported that at least one member of their families had migrated to the Gulf countries, indicating a high prevalence of international labor migration in the area. Only 35.5% of respondents reported no migration to the Gulf countries. The result also indicate that migration has become a significant livelihood strategy for families in northern Ethiopia (Berhe, 2023). Similar findings were reported by Fransen and Kuschminder (2012) in their study on Ethiopian migration patterns, noting that migration often becomes normalized in regions where it is historically frequent and socially embedded.

Other studies also stated that migration becomes a household adaptation strategy, especially in contexts of economic vulnerability (Berhe, 2023; de Haas, 2010). Most of the migrants come from low-income, food-insecure households with limited local employment opportunities. This reflects the “push-pull” theory of migration, where adverse conditions at home (push) interact with perceived opportunities abroad (pull) (Berhe, 2023; Lee, 1966).

This social normalization is reinforced by returnee narratives, community expectations, and even informal recruitment networks.

“If one household has a daughter in Saudi, others will feel pressure to do the same. It is seen as the only way to build a house or start a business.” (FGD with local elders, 2025)

In households where a member migrated, the motivations were primarily economic such as unemployment (84.3%) and poverty (91.7%) were cited as leading factors. These findings suggest that poverty, more than unemployment, is the most potent migration driver, which aligns with the observations of Geda and Yimer (2016) and Lenhardt (2023). Migration can be an escape route from poverty where people move in search of new social and economic opportunities. On the other hand, people can be forced to migrate due to poverty. People's capacity to migrate, whether by choice or pressure, can also be constrained by poverty (Lenhardt, 2023).

Local elders (*abo gereb*) in the FGD emphasised the significant impact of the existing conflict on youth migration in Raya Alamata. One respondent emphasized:

“The war is draining our locality; we are losing our young generation. Due to the conflict, there is no stable governance in Raya Alamata that could organize the youth and mobilize them into development works. Fearing death and involvement in the

conflict, the youth are migrating in huge numbers, leaving families in distress and challenge.” (FGD participant, Raya Alamata)

This narrative illustrates a recurring concern among discussants: the erosion of local governance structures and the inability to harness youth potential for community development. The fear of conscription and exposure to violence has led to widespread youth outmigration, which participants associated with both emotional hardship and socioeconomic strain on families left behind.

This high migration rate aligns with studies, which suggest that Middle Eastern countries remain the dominant destination for Ethiopian labor migrants, particularly women (Fernandez, 2020; IOM, 2021a; Zewdu, 2017a).

4.2.3 Number of Migrants per household

Further, the incidence of migration across households show repetition in the incident.

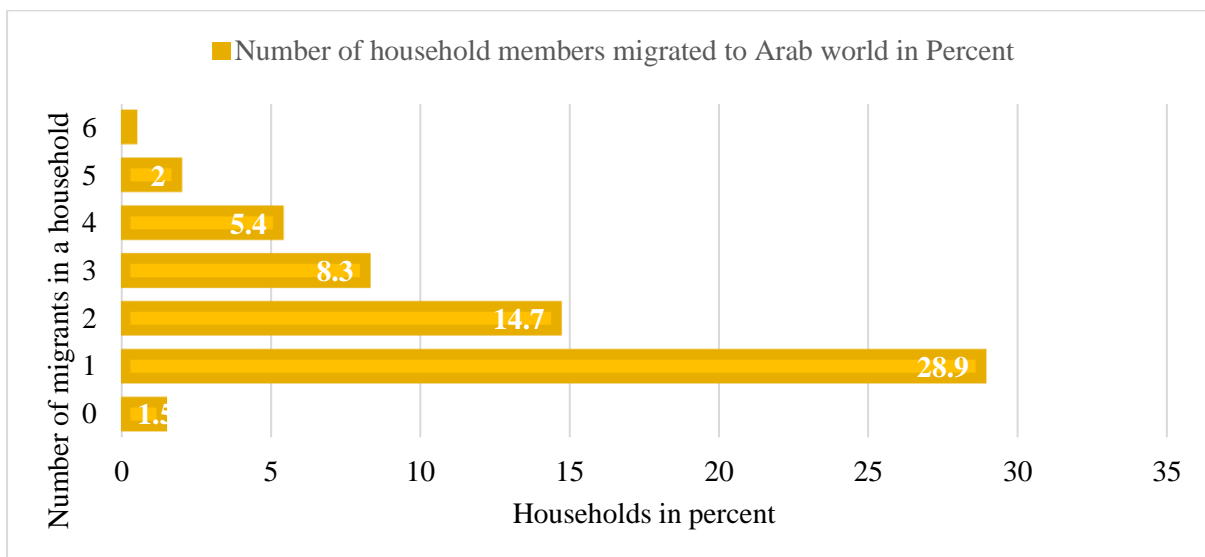


Figure 4-1: Summary of the number of migrants per household in Raya Alamata, 2025

Source: Survey results

From Figure 4.1, nearly 29% of households had one migrant, and a cumulative 32.4% had two or more migrants, indicating repetitive or multiple migration within families, which mostly happened following social networks. This pattern supports the theory of "cumulative causation", where migration networks and past experiences lower the threshold for subsequent migrations (Massey et al., 1993). Families may send more members abroad once one person

establishes a foothold, especially when economic returns, such as remittances or asset purchases, are evident (Fernandez, 2020).

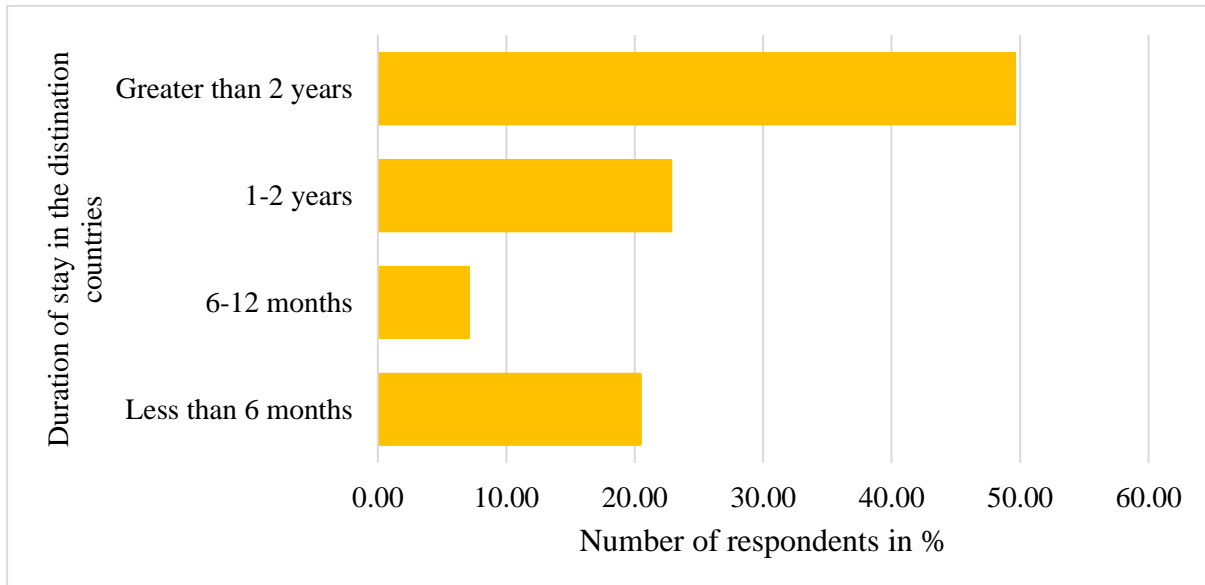


Figure 4-2: Duration of stay by migrants from Raya Alamata in the Gulf countries, 2025

Source: Survey results

Figure 4-2 above presents, among those who were migrated, 20.5% stay for less than 6 months, 22.8% stayed between a year and two, and the remaining 50% stayed for more than two years in the destination countries. This shows many remain abroad for extended periods. This extended duration reflects both strategic agency and structural constraint. As Fernandez (2020) emphasizes, such prolonged absence enables sustained remittance flows and transnational support, yet it also exposes migrants to heightened risks of labor exploitation and social isolation (Schewel & Asmamaw, 2021). The longer migrants remain embedded in precarious employment abroad, the more complex their reintegration becomes upon return, i.e. economically, socially, and psychologically. This underscores the dual-edged nature of migrant stayed in constrained contexts, where aspirations for transformation coexist with enduring vulnerability (Fernandez, 2020; Schewel & Asmamaw, 2021).

4.2.4 Gender and Migration Behaviour

Survey data and KIIs suggest a gendered migration pattern, where a significant number of migrants to the Gulf countries are young women employed in the domestic work sector, Figure 4.3. Survey data also indicate the current increment of women migration to Gulf countries, which is identified as a risk by the respondents.

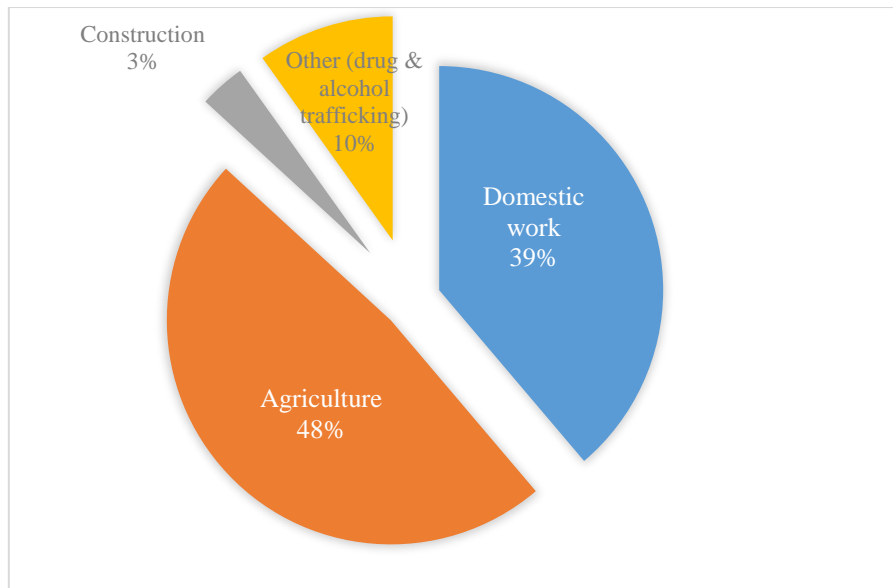


Figure 4-3: Employment sectors of migrants in destination country

Source: Survey results

This phenomenon has profound implications for household dynamics and women's empowerment. While remittances improve household livelihoods, women migrants often face harsh working conditions, including exploitation, isolation, and abuse (Alsop, 2023; Fernandez, 2020; IOM, 2021a; Schewel & Asmamaw, 2021). This aligns with findings from FGDs, where returnee women reported sexual abuse, non-payment of wages, and confiscation of passports.

4.1.5 Behavioural Norms and Community Influence

KII and FGDs revealed that migration is becoming normalized within the community. Migrating to the Gulf countries is no longer seen as exceptional but rather as an expected challenge to try, particularly for women and young people. This social normalization is reinforced by returnee narratives, community expectations, and even extended informal brokers networks (IOM, 2021b).

One of the returnees in the KII:

“I perceive migration positively. My decision to migrate was driven by the desire to help my mother escape poverty. Upon returning, I was able to significantly improve her living conditions, she now owns livestock and property in our rural area. Personally, migration enabled me to transfer from rural life to urban, where I purchased a house, acquired additional assets, and now enjoy a better living condition. In this sense, I

consider myself fortunate to have achieved the expectations I had from the migration.”
(KII respondent, 2025)

FGD with local elders (*abo gereb*) also say

“With the current conflict, the young generation doesn’t feel safe. When the illegal brokers tell them what they would get after migration (‘economic benefits’) and how safe the journey will be, the youth are easily attracted and decided to migrate. The livelihood changes they see from few migration returnees also push them to try their best. ...”

4.2.4 Destinations and Working sectors

As Figure 4-4 states, Saudi Arabia accounts for almost all of migrant destinations, while the UAE accounts for only 1.4%, confirming the dominant pull of Saudi Arabia in irregular and semi-formal migration from Ethiopia (RMMS, 2017). Several KIIs noted that migrants target Saudi Arabia because of many factors such as existing gaps in border control (via Yemen), higher demand for cheap domestic and agricultural labor, and existing social or family networks.

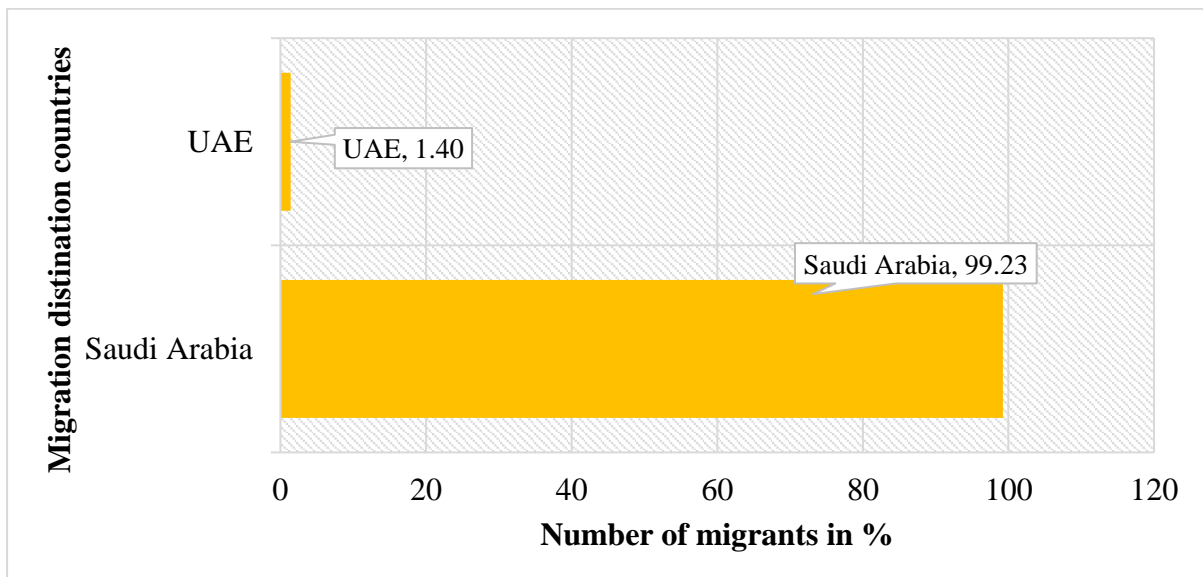


Figure 4-4 : Destination countries of irregular migrants from Raya Alamata

Source: Survey results

This aligns with ACAPS (2021) and Fernandez (2020), who found that the migration corridor from Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia is the most active and dangerous in the Horn of Africa.

The types of work in which the migrants engaged in are mainly Agriculture (35.8%), domestic work (28.9%) and construction (2.5%). There are few, involved in the informal and risky jobs like drug/alcohol trafficking and brokering, highlighting the danger and lack of legal protection.

The dominance of agriculture and domestic work reflects demand for low-skilled labor, often under exploitative conditions including frequently face restricted movement, unpaid wages, and abuse (Fernandez, 2020).

4.2.5 Temporal Patterns and Trends of Migration Incidents

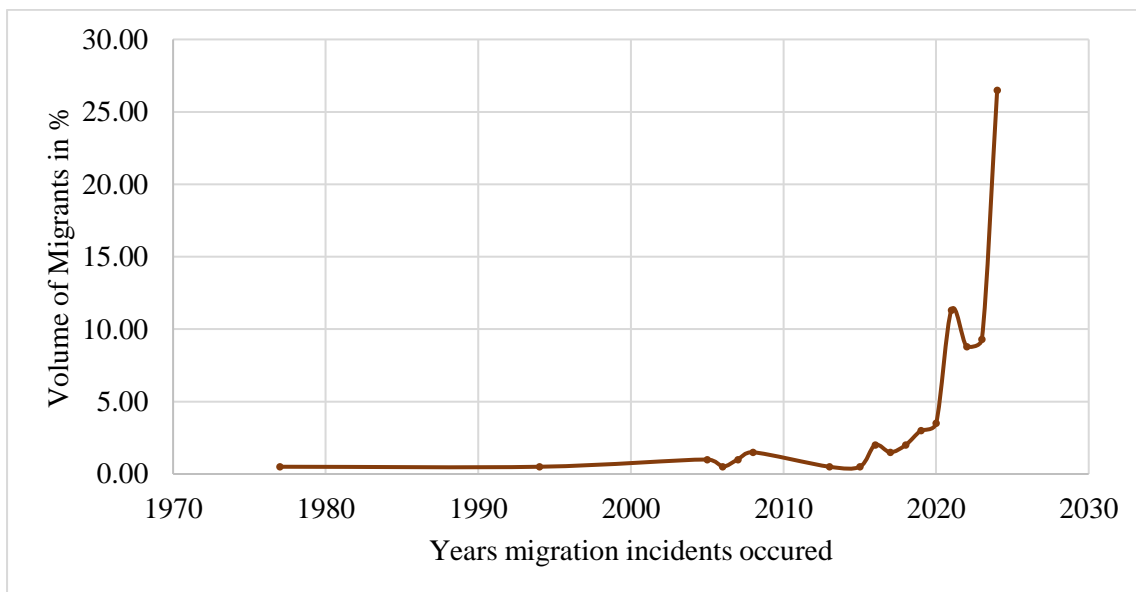


Figure 4-5: Temporal Pattern and Trend of Migration in Norther Ethiopia, 2025

Source: Survey results

Analysis of Figure 4.5 shows that migration looks increasingly recent: over 65% the migration incidents occurred between 2019 and 2025, with 2024 as the peak year (26.5%). Multiple migration durations suggest that migration is a family decision or involving family members migrating at different times. This extraordinary increase aligns with intensifying domestic armed conflict, economic shocks, and perceived opportunities abroad. The increased migration after 2021 may also be associated with the post-conflict displacement, increase in unemployment due to drought and inflation, and the expanded irregular broker networks in the rural areas (IOM, 2021b; Schewel & Asmamaw, 2021).

4.2.6 Legal Status and Irregularity of Migration Pattern

The irregular nature of migration was also another key finding. Many migrants use informal brokers, cross porous borders, and travel without proper documentation. The dangerous routes, including the Djibouti-Yemen and the Bosaso-Yemen corridors, expose migrants to trafficking, abuse, and detention.

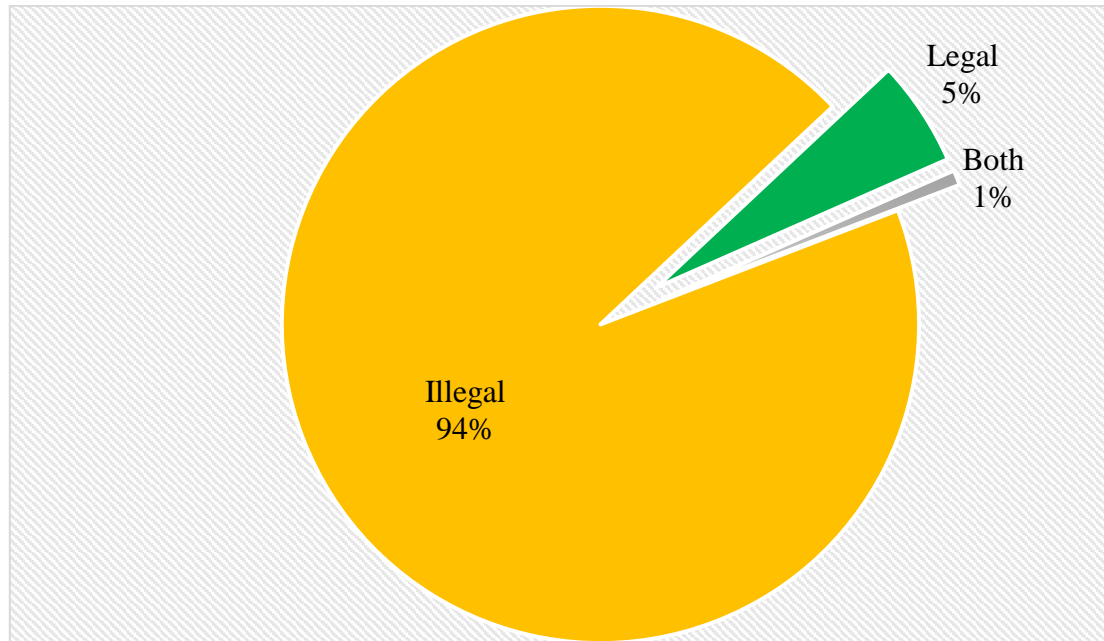


Figure 4-6: Volume of irregularity of Migration in Raya Alamata, 2025

Source: Survey results

As in Figure 4-6, nearly 94% of respondents reported that migrants from the community predominantly use irregular means, and only 5% migrated legally. Irregular migration is often the only accessible pathway due to many factors including strict visa regimes in Gulf countries, lack of formal recruitment channels for rural migrants and exploitation by smugglers. The Key Interview Informants, all returned migrants, followed the irregular route to reach the country of destination, mainly Saudi Arabia. In following the irregular route, 58.3% of them used illegal brokers, whereas the remaining 41.7% reached Saudi Arabia by their own, without any direct support from brokers.

The migration returnees who were deported or forcibly repatriated from Saudi Arabia have many harsh experiences including detention centres, psychological trauma, and unmet expectations.

“My daughter was jailed in Jizan for three months. We had to sell our house to bring her back,” – (KII, Parent of returnee)

Such experiences reveal not only the dangers of irregular migration but also the weakness of pre-migration orientation, regulation of brokers, and lack of post-return support. Similar findings have been documented by ACAPS (2021) and IOM (2021b).

International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2021a & 2021b) underscores this as a structural problem in Ethiopian labor migration. It is exacerbated by demand in destination countries for informal, underpaid labor in domestic work and agriculture.

4.3 Major Socioeconomic, Political, and Environmental Factors Influencing Irregular Migration

Migration from Ethiopia to the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, continues to grow despite the risks associated with irregular migration. Migration, particularly among communities in the study area, reflects a multidimensional set of push factors. The complexity of these drivers indicates how an environment intersect with livelihood strategies, governance, and social dynamics. This chapter analyses the determinants that drive such movements, using both quantitative data from household surveys and qualitative insights from key informant interviews (KIIs). The aim is to develop a multidimensional understanding of the forces that compel individuals particularly youth and returnees, to pursue migration under dangerous conditions.

4.3.1 Economic Drivers: A Spatial Livelihood Crisis

Economic hardship emerged as the most dominant driver of irregular migration as presented in Figure 4-7. Notably, poverty (ranked first by 91.7%) and unemployment (84.3%) point to chronic economic marginalization. The geographic distribution of poverty in Ethiopia is uneven, with its northern part like Tigray historically facing structural underinvestment and recurrent shocks (De Waal, 2018). Lack of access to credit (63.7%), low agricultural returns (75.0%), and lack of farmland (72.5%) further highlight how limited economic opportunities in rural areas create migration-prone geographies.

KII Insight with a migrant returnee puts

“What is there to do at home? No job, no land, no income. I would go again if I had the chance.”

These data underscore a profound structural economic exclusion. Youth and working-age individuals face not only a lack of jobs but also systemic barriers to entrepreneurship and agricultural productivity. Access to credit is limited, meaning that even those willing to start a small business or invest in farming are effectively barred from doing so.

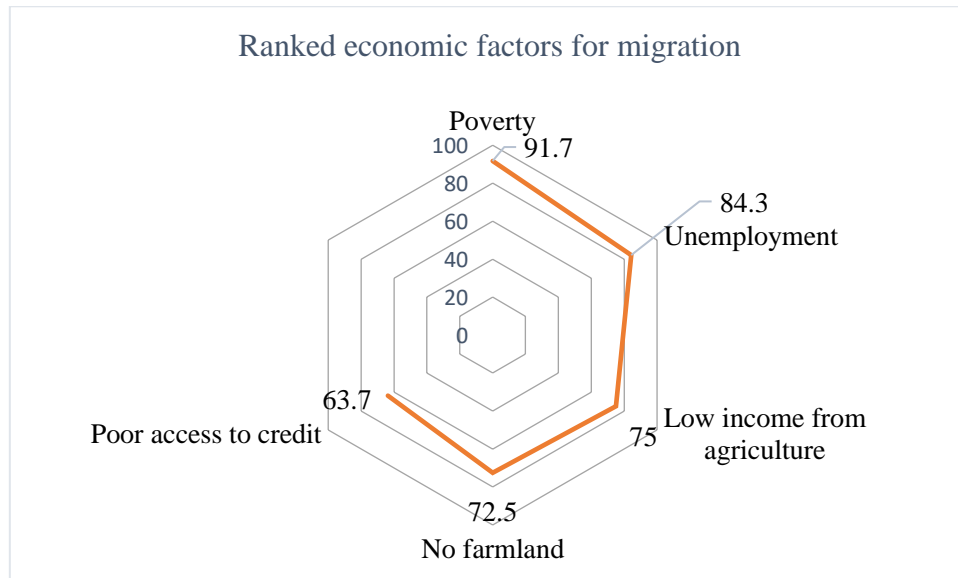


Figure 4-7: Ranked major economic drivers of migration in Raya Alamata, 2025

Source: Survey results

Agricultural communities in semi-arid and degraded landscapes of northern Ethiopia are especially vulnerable to livelihood failure due to climatic stress and weak market linkages. Land fragmentation and youth landlessness intensify rural discontent and migration aspirations, particularly in post-conflict settings (Tsegay, 2021).

In such cases, migration is not simply a matter of searching for a better life but a survival strategy, a spatially embedded coping strategy for individuals, especially where the landscape no longer supports agricultural livelihoods. The geography of poverty thus intersects with migration decisions, where outmigration acts as a response to environmental-economic traps (Black et al., 2011; Tsegay, 2021).

These findings align with studies from across Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, de Haas (2010) emphasized that deteriorating rural livelihoods and lack of off-farm income opportunities are among the top push factors for irregular migration in North and West Africa.

4.3.2 Political Instability: A Regionalized Insecurity Factor

Political instability was cited by 95.1% of respondents as a strong influence to migration decisions of individuals in the study area. From a geographic point of view, political instability is not only temporal but also territorialized, rooted in the disputed spaces of governance and control. The recent Tigray conflict severely disrupted administrative institutions, displaced populations, and weakened the rule of law, transforming regions into zones of chronic insecurity (Tronvoll, 2022).

Experiences show that state withdrawal or militarization of spaces often leads to weakened public service delivery, economic paralysis, and the collapse of social protection systems (Muggah, 2014). These processes intensify outmigration, especially among youth, who see no future in a politically unstable homeland. This has been confirmed by KII respondents and FGD discussants.

In Ethiopia, youth in conflict prone regions choose irregular migration due to the breakdown of social contracts and a lack of trust in governance. Similarly, IOM (2021b) reported that political crises are among the top causes of irregular migration from East Africa to the Gulf.

The above findings imply that interventions related to migration should consider conflict resolution, governance reforms, and youth political inclusion among many. As long as peripheral regions are excluded from national peacebuilding and development agendas, irregular migration will continue as an act of spatial resistance and survival.

4.3.3 Environmental Drivers

Environmental determinants were reported by 87.7% of respondents. Issues such as limited landholding size (57.8%) and lack of irrigation access (71.4%) reveal a clear connection between environmental degradation and migration, as in Figure 4-9. Northern Ethiopia is among the regions most affected by land degradation, soil erosion, and unreliable rainfall, making farming increasingly non-viable (Etefa et al., 2018; Gebrehiwot et al., 2024; Gebrehiwot et al., 2022; Girmay et al., 2009; Nyssen et al., 2015).

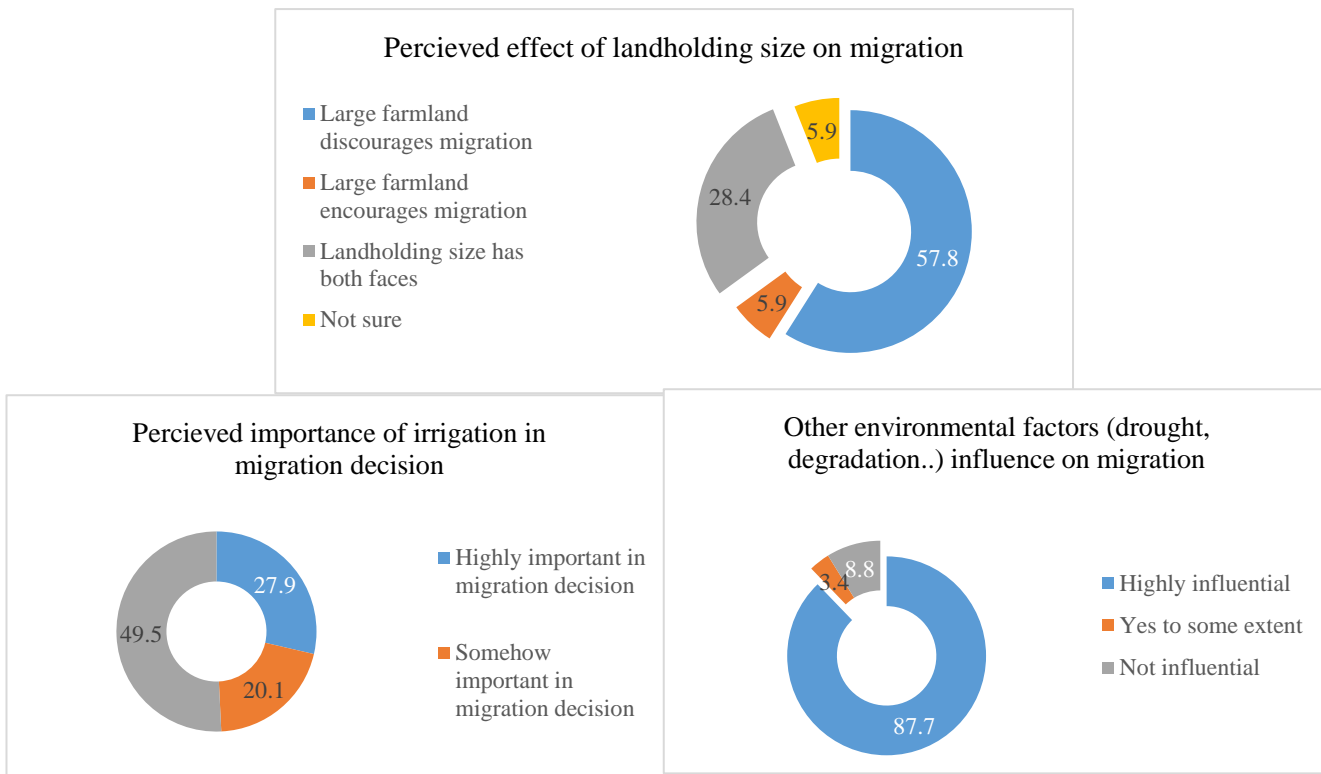


Figure 4-8: Role environmental factors to migration, 2025

Source: Survey results

Gray & Mueller (2012) and Rigaud et al. (2018) underline that environmental migration often stems from chronic, slow-onset environmental stress rather than sudden disasters (Rigaud et al., 2018). In this study, resource-poor agro-ecological zones, where climate change and land scarcity intersect, generate migration 'hotspots'. When access to productive land or adaptive infrastructure like irrigation is lacking, households face spatial livelihood constraints that push them to seek better prospects elsewhere.

Correlation between Environmental Factors and Migration

The correlation analysis reveals several insights into how environmental conditions intersect with migration patterns. Land fertility shows no significant relationship with migration ($r = .070$, $p = .535$). This suggests that in the study area, fertility of land may not be a direct driver of migration, or its influence is mediated by other factors such as access to irrigation, agricultural inputs, or off-farm income opportunities (Black et al., 2011; Gray & Mueller, 2012).

An important result is the moderate, significant association between the perceived importance of irrigation in migration decisions ($r = .225$, $p < .01$). This indicates that households

considering irrigation as crucial in migration choices may view migration as either a means to secure funds for irrigation investment or as an adaptation to unreliable water availability.

Overall, the findings suggest that while environmental considerations, especially irrigation service access, is relevant in migration decision-making, they likely operate as part of a multi-causal framework alongside economic and social factors. The relatively weak correlations with direct environmental perceptions support the notion that migration decisions in rural settings are rarely based on environmental conditions alone but are embedded in broader livelihood strategies and adaptive responses.

4. Social Determinants: Migration as a Networked and Relational Process

Social drivers such as family influence (66.2%), social networks abroad (53.2%), and the aspiration for a better life (96.5%) suggest that migration is highly relational. Social pressure from communities (21.6%) was also a reported motivator, though less significant than family pressure. These findings reflect the moral economy behind migration. Migrants do not act in isolation, rather they are embedded in family and community systems that influence their decisions (de Haas, 2010).

From a geographic viewpoint, social networks act as trans-spatial linkages that reduce the friction of distance (Massey et al., 1993). In communities where migration tends to become normalized, spatial perceptions of opportunity shift, making external destinations more familiar and attainable than local options (Carling & Collins, 2017).

This implies that migration is embedded in the expectation and imaginations of space and people. Once a place becomes associated with success through remittance flows or returnee stories, it reshapes migration culture and behaviour.

Correlation between Social Factors and Migration

The results indicate a strong and significant relationship between having at least one household member migrated to the Gulf countries and the number of household members migrated ($r = .652, p < .01$). This suggests that migration is not an isolated event within many households, but rather a recurring strategy, often facilitated by family and community migration networks (Carling & Collins, 2017; de Haas, 2010; Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009; Massey et al., 1993).

Age of the respondent is positively correlated with both migration variables, migration of household member ($r = .282, p < .01$) and the number of migrated household members ($r =$

.353, $p < .01$). This may reflect the fact that most of the respondents are adults who are of working age and therefore more likely to migrate.

The desire among family members to migrate is not significantly correlated with the actual presence of a migrant in the household ($r = .016$, $p = .826$), but is moderately and significantly related to the number of household members desiring to migrate ($r = .445$, $p < .01$) and strongly related to support for migration within the household ($r = .759$, $p < .01$). This supports the theory that migration aspirations are embedded in household-level attitudinal environments, where supportive social norms increase the likelihood of migration intent (Carling & Schewel, 2017).

The number of household members desiring to migrate is moderately associated with both existing migration incidents ($r = .346$, $p < .01$) and support for migration ($r = .356$, $p < .01$). These patterns suggest a reinforcing effect: households with more migrants tend to have more members aspiring to migrate, and this is further amplified when migration is socially endorsed within the household (de Haas, 2010).

Gender shows no significant correlation with migration variables, aligning with findings that, in many Ethiopian contexts, migration decisions are often household-based rather than solely determined by the gender (IOM, 2020). This aligns with evidence from Ethiopia and other African countries where migration is often a collective livelihood strategy rather than an individual decision dictated by the head's demographic characteristics (de Haas, 2010; Fransen & Kuschminder, 2009; IOM, 2020). However, marital status is significantly and positively associated with migration ($r = .155$, $p < .05$), suggests that marriage tends to increase familial responsibilities, which in turn can encourage labor migration as a strategy to meet household needs. Within the framework of household livelihood diversification theory, migration is viewed less as an individual choice and more as a collective household strategy to spread risks and secure multiple income streams. In contexts such as Northern Ethiopia, where land scarcity, environmental degradation, and rainfall unreliability undermine farming, married individuals often migrate to support dependents, contributing to household resilience through remittances and diversified livelihoods (de Haan & Zoomers, 2005; Ellis, 1998; Massey et al., 1993; Mengistu & Belda, 2024).

Household size also exhibits a moderate positive correlation with migration incidences ($r = .332$ and $r = .458$, $p < .01$). Larger households may rely on migration as a key income diversification strategy, as remittances can help cover the higher consumption needs. Empirical

evidence from Ethiopia and other developing regions shows that household size is positively associated with the likelihood of sending migrants, as remittances provide an important means of meeting basic consumption needs and financing education, health, and agricultural inputs (Ellis, 1998; Ezra & Kiros, 2001; Mengistu & Belda, 2024). Conversely, educational attainment is negatively correlated with migration variables ($r = -.267$ and $r = -.214$, $p < .01$). Individuals with higher levels of schooling are more likely to access local employment opportunities and non-farm income sources, reducing the need to migrate for survival. In contrast, households with limited education often depend more heavily on migration, particularly low-skilled labor migration, as a livelihood strategy (Admas et al., 2024). This pattern has been documented in Ethiopia and elsewhere, reflecting how education mediates access to opportunity structures and influences household migration decisions (Ezra & Kiros, 2001; Gibson & McKenzie, 2012).

Overall, the correlation patterns suggest that migration to the Gulf countries particularly Saudi Arabia is embedded within household demographic structures, particularly influenced by age, marital status, and household size, while higher education among persons appears to reduce reliance on migration. These findings align with the broader literature on migration as both a livelihood strategy and a socially embedded process shaped by household characteristics.

4.3.4 Resources and Assets: Spatial Capital and Migration Propensity

Household assets strongly influence migration decisions. Livestock ownership, reported by 83.3% of respondents, provides economic alternatives that reduce the need for labor migration. Access to savings or work in nearby towns, noted by 74.0%, also affects mobility. Savings show a dual effect: 36.3% of households indicated it discourages migration, while others use it to finance migration, reflecting a paradox where wealth can both inhibit and enable movement. These patterns align with household livelihood diversification theory, highlighting how existing assets, risk management strategies, and spatial economic opportunities shape migration decisions (de Haas, 2021; Ellis, 1998; Mengistu & Belda, 2024).

Generally, the drivers of irregular migration in this context are deeply geographic, structured by uneven development, environmental vulnerability, political issues, and networked social spaces. Migration is not just a personal decision, but a spatial strategy rooted in local realities and global imaginaries.

4.4 Analysis of Benefits, Challenges, and Coping Strategies of Irregular Migration

Irregular migration to Gulf countries has been a persistent phenomenon, driven by economic aspirations despite significant risks and challenges. The presented data reveals complex dimensions related to benefits, challenges, abuses, coping strategies, integration, and impacts on migrants and their families. This analysis synthesizes these findings with implications and discussions, highlighting the realities faced by irregular migrants.

Benefits gained by Irregular Migrants

The majority of survey respondents reported benefits they gained from irregular migration, with 35.8% receiving remittances, 33.3% improved living condition, 27% investing in livestock and property, and 6.9% acquiring skills and education (Figure 4-9). These findings affirm that migration serves as a deliberate livelihood strategy, enhancing household welfare and human capital development. Consistent with previous research, remittances and skill acquisition contribute to economic resilience and diversified income sources, particularly in rural areas with limited local opportunities (Ellis, 1998; Mengistu & Belda, 2024). Moreover, 23% reported improved social status post-migration, suggesting enhanced community standing (de Haas, 2010). However, 13.5% indicated no benefit but cost, highlighting the risks when expectations do not align with outcomes.

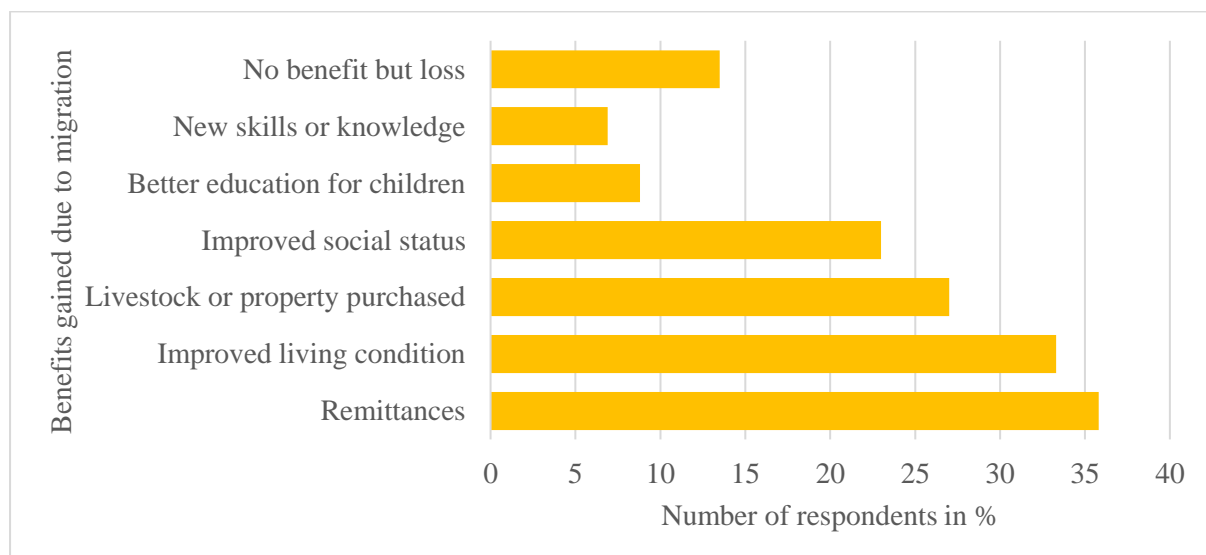


Figure 4-9: Benefits reported by migrants and families from irregular migration

Source: Survey results

Impacts on Families and Asset Accumulation

Migrants' remittances contribute to asset accumulation with 75% KII informants (returnee) reported purchases of land, houses, or livestock. This supports migration as a mechanism for economic advancement. Yet, 33.3% reported no improvement in living standards, and some described worsening family conditions, debt, or property loss due to migration costs and exploitation. This dichotomy reveals the uneven developmental impacts of migration on left-behind households, consistent with the "migration-development paradox" (de Haas, 2012).

Migrants' expectations largely centered on economic improvement and social mobility but often met harsh realities including exploitation and legal challenges. Notably, 66.7% expressed no intention to remigration, mentioning negative experiences, while 33.3% remained willing, particularly if legal pathways were available. This highlights the critical role of legal status and migrant rights in shaping migration trajectories and decisions (Carling & Collins, 2017; de Haas, 2010).

This analysis underscores the urgent need for policy interventions focusing on protection, legal support, and labor rights enforcement for irregular migrants. Given the economic contributions documented, regularization pathways and bilateral agreements, as it has been evolving between the government of Ethiopia and Gulf countries, could mitigate risks and enhance benefits (IOM, 2020). Additionally, pre-departure orientation and language training may facilitate integration and reduce vulnerabilities. Social protection mechanisms for families left behind should also be strengthened to buffer negative impacts.

Challenges and Abuses Faced by Migrants

Irregular migrants face numerous challenges, with 59.3% reporting exploitation and 48% experiencing abuse, including physical and sexual violence. Additional vulnerabilities stem from unsafe migration routes (52%), legal challenges (36.3%), discrimination (42.6%), and language barriers (27.9%). These risks exacerbate the marginalization of irregular migrants and limit their access to protection, social services, and economic opportunities. The findings are consistent with global evidence showing that irregular migrants are disproportionately exposed to human rights abuses and social exclusion (Carling & Collins, 2017; de Haas, 2010). Addressing these structural vulnerabilities is critical for improving migrant safety and safeguarding human rights.

The types of abuse reported by irregular migrants include non-payment or delayed wages, forced religious conversion, hunger, racism, physical torture, and sexual harassment. The absence of legal protection exacerbates these risks, limiting access to justice and reinforcing cycles of exploitation (Koser, 2010). In response, migrants often rely on informal coping mechanisms, such as adapting to circumstances, avoiding conflict, and seeking support from peers, underscoring the lack of formal institutional support. These patterns highlight the urgent need for policies and interventions that strengthen legal protection, ensure access to justice, and address the vulnerabilities faced by irregular migrants (Carling & Collins, 2017; de Haas, 2010).

Living and Working Conditions

Migrants described a range of living and working conditions from ‘*good wage*’ factory work to ‘*difficult*’ herding and agriculture jobs, often characterized by instability and lack of job security. Few of them take part in the illegal drug and alcohol trading when they feel the wage doesn’t meet their expectations. This aligns with literature showing irregular migrants typically engage in low-paid, insecure, and informal labor sectors (Carling & Collins, 2017; de Haas, 2010). The harsh environmental conditions, unpredictable employment, and inadequate social protection faced by migrants reflect challenges documented in the migrant labor sectors of Gulf countries, where irregular and low-skilled workers frequently encounter exploitation, limited legal protection, and precarious living conditions (de Haas, 2010; de Haas, 2012; IOM, 2021b, 2024). These parallels highlight that structural vulnerability, including poor labor regulations, weak enforcement, and socio-legal marginalization, are common across contexts, emphasizing the need for targeted policies to safeguard migrant rights and improve living and working conditions both domestically and abroad.

Coping and Integration Strategies

Integration remains limited due to language barriers, legal status, and social exclusion. Migrants commonly employ *sign language* and peer knowledge sharing to communicate and navigate their environment. A third of the Key Informant Interviewee shared experiences on how to communicate, manage conflict and work environment from persons who had previous migration experiences. This reflects a pragmatic adaptation to linguistic and cultural isolation, as noted by IOM (2021a, 2021b). However, the reliance on such informal mechanisms indicates the gaps in formal integration policies.

4.5 Emerging Irregular Migration Trends and Risks to Gulf Countries

Introduction

Irregular migration to Gulf countries has increasingly become a critical phenomenon shaped by complex socio-economic, political, and environmental factors. This analysis examines emerging trends in migration flows, associated risks, and the coping strategies of migrants, with a focus on vulnerabilities arising from trafficking, exploitation, and conflict in Ethiopia, a key source country. Understanding these dynamics is essential for policymakers, humanitarian actors, and researchers aiming to mitigate risks and protect migrants' rights.

Trends in Irregular Migration

Data collected from 204 respondents indicate a significant increase in irregular migration to Gulf countries over the past five years, with over 93% confirming a marked rise (Table 4-6). This upsurge reflects underlying drivers, including economic hardship and political instability, particularly Ethiopia's ongoing conflict, which has displaced over 4.5 million people as of June 2024 (OCHA, 2024). These structural pressures compel households to seek alternative income sources and safer living conditions, reinforcing migration as a critical livelihood and coping strategy in conflict-affected regions (Admasu, 2024; Nigusie, 2025). Only a small fraction of respondents noted no change or were unsure, underscoring the widespread recognition of intensified migratory movements.

Table 4-6: Perceived change in migration trend in Raya Alamata

Migration increased?	Frequency	Percent
Yes, significantly	185	93.43
Yes, a little bit	7	3.54
No change	2	1.01
Not sure	4	2.02
Total	198	100.00

Source: Survey results

Emerging Risks and Vulnerabilities

The growth in irregular migration has amplified a range of new risks. Nearly all respondents (98%) reported an increase in illegal migration, with a notable rise in female migrants (99.4%) (Figure 4-10). This shift exposes migrants to heightened violence (99.4%) and poor working

conditions (97%). Gender-specific vulnerabilities are pronounced; 59.3% of respondents identified females as more susceptible to sexual abuse and exploitation, while a smaller proportion acknowledged risks for males, including torture. The consensus that young people are especially vulnerable (97.1%) highlights how youth, due to limited economic resources and inadequate migration experience, face disproportionate exposure to trafficking networks, exploitation, and unsafe employment (IOM, 2024; Nisrane et al., 2019; Sisay, 2024).

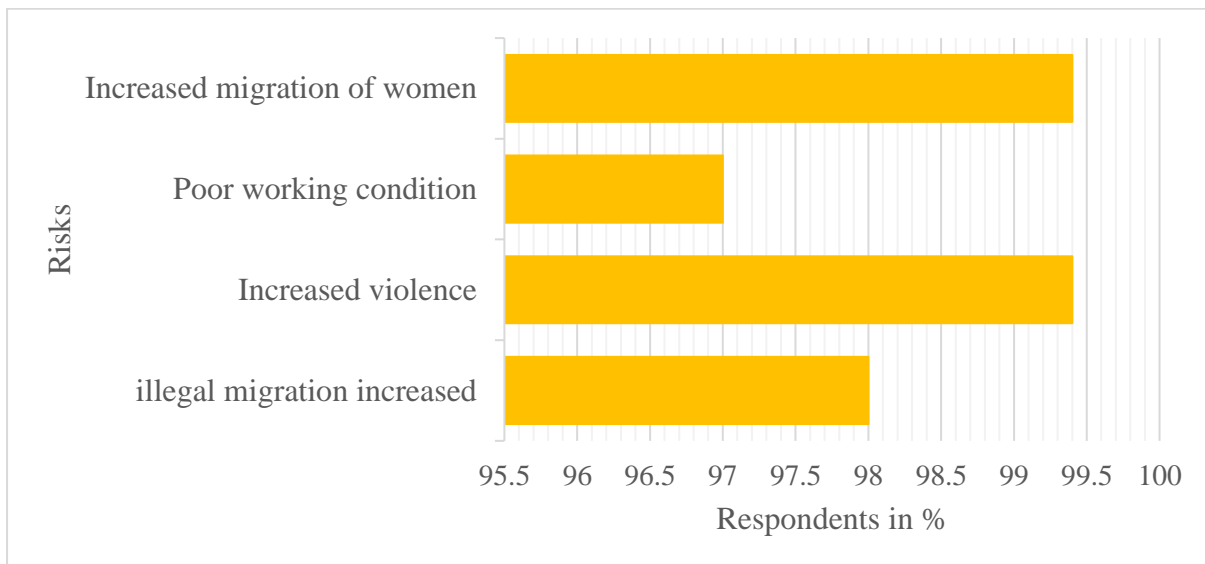


Figure 4-10: Identified increase in risk of irregular migration by respondents, 2025

Source: Survey results

Irregular migration routes exacerbate migrants’ exposure to trafficking, health hazards, and limited legal protections. Recent studies show that nearly half of migrants report poor access to legal support, while over a third note limited communication with their families, creating profound social isolation that compounds vulnerability (IOM, 2024). Such isolation restricts access to assistance and forces many migrants to depend on exploitative networks and smugglers, increasing risks of abuse (Nisrane et al., 2019). Evidence also highlights that unsafe and clandestine routes heighten the likelihood of violence, illness, and psychological trauma, especially among women and young migrants who face gendered and age-specific vulnerabilities (Sisay, 2024).

Challenges Faced During Migration

Migrants face multiple, interlinked challenges while travelling. Over half (52.9%) reported lacking funds for travel costs, while exploitation by brokers affected 45.1%. Nearly half experienced unsafe travel conditions characterized by hunger and illness (47.1%). Physical

abuse by traffickers, known as “*Haramis*,” including torture and sexual assault, was reported by 19.1% of respondents. *Haramis* use violence and intimidation to pressure migrant families into paying ransom, sometimes forcing families to sell homes or possessions to free relatives (de Haas, 2010; Zewdu, 2017b). Because migrants have transferred to the *Haramis*, the amount of money the families are required to transfer become beyond the families can afford.

Female migrants are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, coercion, and harassment both during transit and at their destinations. In some Gulf countries, reports indicate that so-called “day-off” arrangements, respondents referred it as *Hijaza*, are misused by employers or intermediaries to coerce women into sexual exploitation. Instead of providing rest or freedom of movement, these arrangements can expose female migrants to heightened risks of abuse, underscoring the gender-specific vulnerabilities inherent in irregular and domestic migrant labor.

These abuses have devastating physical and psychological impacts on migrants and impose severe economic burdens on families. One family was compelled to sell their home and transferred large sums (600,000 ETB) to traffickers, highlighting the grave social costs. Another family sold their home and household materials to free member of them. Another mother of migrants reported that one of her daughters was in the hands of *Harami* and she was made to pay double of the amount initially agreed to free her daughter. Her daughter faced serious abuses including sexual harassments and forced sex. A returned migrant also testified that he was caught and beaten by a *Harami* and paid a huge amount of money. The power imbalance between migrants and exploiters creates a cycle of dependency and vulnerability that is difficult to escape (ACAPS, 2021a; Garcia-Vazquez & Meneses-Falcon, 2024; Iglesias-Rios et al., 2018; UNODC, 2021a).

Role of Ethiopia’s Conflict in Migration Dynamics

The ongoing conflict in northern Ethiopia exacerbates irregular migration, with 96.6% of respondents agreeing that current fight intensifies migration pressures. Conflict disrupts livelihoods, increases displacement, and undermines governance structures that might otherwise regulate migration safely (IOM, 2022). As a result, many migrants resort to irregular and dangerous routes, heightening exposure to the aforementioned risks.

Generally, this analysis reveals a rapidly increasing trend of irregular migration from Ethiopia to Gulf countries, coupled with escalating risks including trafficking, exploitation, violence, and economic hardships. Women and youth face disproportionate vulnerabilities, aggravated

by hazardous migration routes and exploitative networks. The ongoing conflict in Ethiopia further fuels this crisis, demanding urgent attention.

4.6 Irregular Migration Routes from Raya Alamata to Saudi Arabia: Identification and Characterization

4.6.1 The Main Routes

Irregular migration from northern Ethiopia's Raya Alamata toward Saudi Arabia follows complex and dangerous routes that combine travels on land, maritime crossings, and extended desert journeys. These routes are facilitated by smuggling networks and shaped by geographical, political, and security conditions along the way (IOM, 2021b). Based on collected narratives from KII and FGDs, three primary irregular migration corridors are identified: the *Djibouti corridor*, the *Somalia corridor*, and a *hybrid corridor* mixing both Djibouti and Somalia pathways.

A. Djibouti Corridor

Migrants departing from Timuga, Waja, or surrounding kebeles often follow a path via Kobo, Addis Ababa, Jigjiga, and Wuchale before crossing into Djibouti through Alhamdelela. From there, sea crossings typically occur from coastal points such as Hayu or Alwadid, lasting between 7 and 40 hours. Once in Yemen, migrants travel from Aden or Menebuh toward the Saudi border, often on foot or via brokers' vehicles. While this route offers a relatively shorter maritime leg, it carries higher risks of interception by border security forces and frequent demands for bribes at checkpoints (UNODC, 2021b).

B. Somalia Corridor

The Somalia-bound route begins similarly within Ethiopia but diverges toward Berbera or Bosaso via Jigjiga, Lasano, or Lasalu. The sea crossing from Bosaso can last between 14 and 72 hours, with conditions described as overcrowded and hazardous. Upon arrival in Yemen, often at Red Cross camps near the coast, migrants travel through desert regions such as Ateq, Alihusen, and Saeda before reaching Alsabet and then crossing into Saudi Arabia. This corridor typically involves longer periods on foot, greater exposure to dehydration, and the need to self-fund food and water supplies, increasing physical strain.

C. Hybrid Corridor

Some migrants use a combination of Djibouti and Somalia routes, blending vehicle transport with long stretches on foot to avoid checkpoints. Maritime crossings range from 18 to 34 hours.

From Yemeni entry points, migrants follow routes through Fifa, Forsh, Saeda, and into Saudi cities such as Tayif, Abha, or Jizan. This hybrid approach is often improvised, making it unpredictable and dangerous due to shifting smuggler tactics and increased exposure to hunger and heat in mixed terrains (IOM, 2021).

Table 4-7: Geographic description of the main migration routes of irregular migration from Raya Alamata

Key Stages	Main Locations	Mode of Transport
Ethiopian Interior Travel	Timuga >>> Dleroka >>> Wuhalimat >>> Hayu >>> Addis Ababa >>> Jigjiga >>> Harar	Primarily by car, sometimes on foot at checkpoints
Crossing into Somali/Djibouti Region	Jigjiga >> Hargeisa >> Berbera >> Bereo >> Basaso/Besaso (Somali port) Djibouti >> Hayu	Mixed: car and foot
Sea Crossing (Red Sea / Gulf of Aden)	Basaso / Besaso >> Yemen (Aden, Red Cross camps)	Small boat/motorboat (18–72 hours), overcrowded and dangerous
Yemen Transit	Yemen (Ateq, Saada, Alihusen, Senua, Forsh)	Mostly on foot, sometimes car
Saudi Arabian Border and Interior	Saudi border (e.g., Jizan, Abha, Jidda) >> interior cities/workplaces	On foot (sometimes weeks), occasional vehicle rides

Source: Survey results

4.6.2 Characteristics of the Routes

Migrants from Raya Alamata follow complex, multi-modal migration corridors involving a combination of car, foot, and sea travel. The routes typically involve crossing multiple borders; within Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, Yemen; and finally entering Saudi Arabia. Below is a summarized of the travel characteristics as described by informants:

Ethiopian Interior: Initial Movement and Border Checks

Travel Modes

In terms of the travel modes, migrants often begin their journey by car, traveling from their home in Raya Alamata (Timuga, Waja, Gedera, Kunkura Kebele, ...), through regional hubs like Kobo, Dese, Woldeya, Logiya), Addis Ababa, Jigjiga, and Harar.

Challenges Facing

Checkpoints are frequent, requiring migrants to either pay bribes or travel on foot to avoid detection, causing delays, exhaustion, other risks (KII, 2025).

Safety of the Route

This route is relatively safer compared to later stages but financial burden is significant due to transportation costs and checkpoint bribes.

Example

“From Waja to Kobo, to Addis and Jigjiga all by car, to Artishek by car but on foot when checkpoints” (KII, 2025).

Somali/Djibouti Coastal Transit

Locations

These locations are outside of the Ethiopian territory and mainly in Djibouti and Somalia. The major locations include Hargeisa, Berbera, Bereo, Lasano, Alhamdelela, and Besaso serve as key transit towns.

Travel Modes

The travel modes in this section of the travel involves cars and walking, often under brokers' guidance. Food costs mostly borne by migrants.

Conditions

The conditions of the travel in this part cover many locations to reach the last point to cross the sea. They are generally poor nutrition and overcrowding, especially at Basaso port, increase vulnerability.

Example:

The informants illustrated the way as follows:

“Home to Addis to Jigjiga to Hargesa to Berbera to Bere'a to Lasalu to Besaso to cross sea to Yemen” (KII, 2025).

Sea Crossing to Yemen

Duration

Sea crossings last from 18 to 72 hours, often on overcrowded boats without adequate food or water.

Risks

High risk of drowning, sea storms, and abandonment. Migrants recount hunger, thirst, and witnessing deaths during this segment.

Safety

Extreme danger; many migrants report trauma and loss here.

Example

“Crossing the sea with 70 people (sometimes 140) with only biscuit and dates as food” (KII, 2025).

Yemen Transit

Rest Points

Red Cross camps (e.g., Aden, Yemeni border) serve as rare rest and recovery points.

Travel Modes

Mostly on foot through deserts and conflict zones, sometimes by car arranged by brokers.

Risks

Exposure to torture by traffickers (“*Haramis*”), robbery, hunger, thirst, and political instability. Many migrants report being tortured and extorted here.

Example

“Tortured by Haramis and grabbed my money” and “3 days in Yemen desert, traveling 5 hours on foot” (KII, 2025).

Saudi Arabian Border and Interior

Border Crossing

Entry into Saudi Arabia often involves walking for several days through harsh terrain and hunger, evading border guards.

Post-Border Travel

Migrants may travel by foot or broker-arranged vehicles to work sites (Jizan, Abha, Jidda).

Risks

Migrants face police arrests, shootings, imprisonment, and harsh working conditions. Some report friends dying or being shot.

Example

“24 days travel on foot in Saudi Arabia to reach Jidda” and “3 of my friends were shot dead while traveling in Saudi land” (KII, 2025).

Challenges and Hazards

Checkpoints and Bribes: while crossing, migrants report paying at multiple checkpoints or taking lengthy detours on foot to avoid them.

Food and Water Scarcity: during the course of travel especially in Somalia and Djibouti territories, most migrants buy supplies themselves; others rely on brokers, which can mean severe shortages. Yemen’s desert crossing is notorious for starvation and dehydration deaths (IOM, 2020).

Smuggler Abuse: Migrants face physical beatings, overcrowding, abandonment, and in some cases, extortion for ransom.

Sea Risks: Capsizing, drowning, and prolonged exposure without shelter are recurrent dangers (UNODC, 2021a, 2021b).

Violence: Armed robberies, sexual assaults, and harassment by both smugglers and armed groups are documented across all corridors.

Social Organization

The migration process is dominated by broker networks, which arrange transportation, maritime passage, and in some cases, temporary shelter and food. However, brokers are also a primary source of abuse, including physical violence and financial exploitation. The Red Cross plays a limited but crucial role at certain Yemeni entry points, providing rest, basic medical care, and clean water. Despite this, most of the journey is unassisted and exposes migrants to sustained harm.

The irregular migration routes from Raya Alamata to Saudi Arabia generally reveal a highly dangerous and exploitative system where every stage, from Ethiopian departure points to final Saudi destinations, presents acute risks. While the Djibouti route offers shorter maritime travel, it carries high arrest risks; the Somalia route prolongs exposure to sea dangers and desert hardship; and the hybrid route magnifies unpredictability and vulnerability. Addressing these migration patterns requires targeted interventions: dismantling smuggler networks, improving humanitarian aid in transit zones, and enhancing safe migration pathways to reduce reliance on risky irregular routes (IOM, 2021a).

CHAPTER 5 –

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a complex and multi-dimensional picture of irregular migration, shaped by intertwined socio-economic, political, environmental, and cultural factors. Over the past five years, there has been a marked increase in migration trends, with over 90% of respondents confirming that migration from the study area has either significantly or slightly increased. This growth reflects broader regional patterns observed across the Horn of Africa, where economic fragility, environmental stressors, and political instability have created conditions conducive to outward migration. In our study, the predominant destinations were the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, consistent with documented patterns of Ethiopian labor migration over the last two decades.

Drivers of Migration

The primary drivers are rooted in persistent economic deprivation, high unemployment rates, and limited livelihood opportunities in rural and peri-urban settings. Young people, in particular, are drawn to the perceived economic opportunities abroad, driven by both the aspiration to escape poverty and the social pressures created by visible remittance benefits in migrant-sending communities.

Environmental stressors, notably recurrent droughts and land degradation, have further compounded livelihood insecurity. The intersection of climate change impacts and economic fragility creates a double vulnerability, pushing households to view migration as an adaptive strategy. Additionally, family reunification and the influence of established migration networks play a significant role in lowering the perceived risks of migration by providing information, logistical assistance, and emotional support to prospective migrants.

Risks and Vulnerabilities

Despite the perceived benefits, irregular migration exposes migrants to severe risks. Field interviews revealed numerous accounts of exploitation, forced labor, sexual abuse, and physical violence, particularly during transit through Yemen and upon arrival in the Gulf States. Women and girls face heightened vulnerabilities to gender-based violence, especially under the guise of *hijaza* practices. Migrants also face significant dangers during sea crossings,

including overcrowding, capsizing, and drowning, a reality mirrored in International Organization for Migration data on the deadly Gulf of Aden crossing.

Routes and Patterns

The primary migration routes from Ethiopia follow eastern pathways through Djibouti or Somalia into Yemen, and onward to Saudi Arabia. Smuggling networks facilitate these movements, often in collusion with corrupt officials, but at the expense of migrant safety and dignity. Our data further suggests that shifts in border control measures or political tensions can alter route patterns, forcing migrants into more dangerous and costly alternatives.

Overall, irregular migration from the study area is driven by a structural combination of economic necessity, environmental distress, social aspiration, and network effects, but is sustained by informal migration systems that profit from human mobility. While migrants are aware of the risks, these are often downplayed in favour of the potential economic rewards, reflecting a calculated risk-taking strategy. As indicated in regional migration literature, without structural interventions in origin areas, migration pressures are likely to persist or intensify.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested.

1. Enhance Local Livelihood Opportunities

- Implement targeted employment programs for youth and women, focusing on skills development, small enterprise financing, and agribusiness value chains.
- Promote climate-smart agricultural practices to counter environmental degradation and reduce migration as a coping strategy.

2. Strengthen Awareness and Risk Communication

- Develop sustained community-based awareness campaigns that convey realistic information on migration risks, legal migration alternatives, and rights abroad.
- Leverage returnee testimonies and diaspora engagement to provide credible narratives that counter misinformation.

3. Expand Safe and Legal Migration Pathways

- Negotiate bilateral labor agreements with Gulf States to improve working conditions, ensure legal protections, and establish transparent recruitment mechanisms.
- Strengthen pre-departure training for prospective migrants on rights, financial literacy, and destination-country realities.

4. Combat Smuggling and Trafficking Networks

- Enhance cross-border cooperation and intelligence-sharing among Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, and Yemen to dismantle smuggling operations.
- Strengthen law enforcement capacity while ensuring that anti-smuggling measures do not criminalize migrants.

5. Support for Returnees and Reintegration

- Develop reintegration programs that combine psychosocial support, skills upgrading, and start-up capital to reduce re-migration pressures.
- Partner with civil society organizations to address stigma and discrimination faced by returnees.

6. Integrate Migration into Climate Adaptation Strategies

- Recognize migration as part of household adaptation portfolios and include it in national climate resilience frameworks.
- Invest in rural infrastructure, water management, and climate services to reduce environmentally driven migration.

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