

Rural-urban migration in Ethiopia

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CASE STUDY

Environmental change in the highlands of Ethiopia contributes, in a variety of ways, to encouraging migration out of rural areas.

Discussion of the potential for environmental change to drive migration has often assumed migration to be an inevitable outcome of adverse environmental change. While this may be true in the case of permanent inundation due to a rise in sea levels, the link between environmental change and migration in the case of desertification is far less clear. Research in a specific area of the north-eastern Ethiopian highlands¹ shows that environmental change does, in some cases, trigger migration. However, ascribing sole agency to environmental factors is likely to be overly simplistic as it ignores the importance of social factors in mediating the decisions made by individuals whether or not to migrate.

people to escape livelihoods which depend on the availability of water but is also a strategy for managing drought. To this end permanent migration to towns is undertaken by certain members of a household who settle in urban areas so as to attain the capital necessary for the start-up and running costs of equipment (such as irrigation pumps) which will mitigate the impact of increasingly variable rainfall patterns in the highlands to which the rest of their household remains exposed.

Lack of availability of sufficiently productive land is the most common cause of rural-urban migration. Environmental changes put stress on rural livelihoods but it is not sufficient

other than environmental change are important in driving migration.²

The first story is that of a migrant who left the countryside because of limited availability and poor productivity of land. Without a means to access sufficiently productive land, he decided to migrate to Weldiya, a nearby town. He did so in the hope of finding work which would allow him to support an independent household of his own. Now twenty-nine years old, he has been living in Weldiya for five years. He currently makes a living weaving baskets and mats which he sells in town. Despite his success in starting his own household he remains disillusioned with his life in Weldiya.

The second story is that of a farmer living in the highland zone on the escarpment who is unwilling to migrate to the urban areas despite acknowledging that environmental conditions in the rural areas are becoming increasingly difficult: He thinks that his household was better off in the past. He also thinks that his land has become less productive as a result of the increasingly erratic nature of the rainfall which, as well as reducing crop production, exposes the soil to erosion by wind and rain, which in turn decreases soil productivity. He thinks that droughts have become worse, with the rainfall becoming increasingly unpredictable and falling at the "wrong time of year". As a response, he says, people have tried planting their crops at different times of year; however, this has not worked and people have had to resort to simply planting crops and hoping for the rains. He has begun selling cattle preemptively in an attempt to get better prices. He says that if conditions continue to worsen he will have to find other ways of making money. This, he thinks, will include more trading of beans, maize and timber. In order to raise the capital to make this possible he intends to take a loan from the local credit association.



Intensive cultivation, Ethiopia.

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Drought is thought to be the environmental stressor of greatest concern in the highlands of Ethiopia. One-off major droughts encourage both temporary-distress migration and permanent migration. Permanent migration is employed as it allows

to focus simply on the degree to which environmental change is likely to have an impact on household incomes and thus lead to migration. Stories from the lives of a number of individuals highlight the degree to which factors

What is immediately noticeable from these two accounts is that while both cite impoverishing environmental changes, one has been willing to migrate while the other has preferred to change his current livelihood strategy – with varying degrees of success – in an attempt to adapt to the changing environmental conditions. What we see is that household and individual responses to environmental change are conditioned by the degree to which migration constitutes a possible strategy for the individual. This may not seem a particularly insightful finding. It is somewhat obvious to claim that individuals will only undertake migration if it is possible. What is important, however, is to appreciate that structural forces other than environmental change are clearly important in determining the degree to which migration constitutes the major response to environmental change.

One might therefore surmise that as long as one incorporates the major structural force of land availability it might be possible to gauge the degree to which migration will constitute a response to environmental change. However, data from the field present a far more complicated picture. Accounts from migrants show that a great variety of individual factors are also important in determining whether the experience of environmental change will result in migration. The following accounts make this point.

In the face of environmental change, a middle-aged farmer with a large household and no skills is considering migrating to another, more productive rural area. He claims that if farming conditions continue to worsen he will look to migrate somewhere else. He says that his large family size means that he will not be able to migrate to an urban area. He says he would like to migrate to “somewhere productive” but he is not yet sure where that might be.

The fourth story is of a young urban migrant who came to town in order to continue his schooling so that he might escape the precarious agrarian life of his parents in the rural areas. He decided to come to Weldiya in order to continue his schooling in the hope that he might eventually be

able to find work in the urban areas. He thinks that the main reason for the poor productivity of the land in the rural areas has to do with the availability of water which he ascribes to the erratic rains which now fall for only two months of the year. He says that he likes the rural areas and would like to go back but feels that this will not be possible unless some form of mechanised irrigation system is put in place which can guarantee water to farmers in the area.

From these accounts it is apparent that a multitude of factors need to operate together before the perception of adverse environmental change translates into migration. While conditions for rural farming appear to provide only a precarious livelihood, the experiences of migrants do not appear to be a great deal easier in the town. While virtually all the farmers who were interviewed described the deteriorating farming conditions in the rural areas, a large number of urban migrants similarly described their disillusionment with their life in Weldiya. Their story was primarily one of struggling to find work and battling the relatively high costs of living.

Individuals have to employ complicated strategies as they try to calculate the relative advantages of moving against the relative advantages of remaining behind. Such strategies might involve weighing up the chances of finding work in town against the possibility that one might come across a good deal on renting land in the rural areas. Access to both land and employment may depend on an individual either having friends or family already resident in the urban areas or having an ageing family member with good land in the rural areas. In a context where neither the rural nor the urban environment offers an absolute panacea for livelihood security, other forces within individual experience become important in determining the impetus to migrate.

In addition to these major structural factors there also appeared to be a myriad of ‘idiosyncratic factors’ which operate at the level of the individual to determine the degree to which the experience of environmental change manifests itself in migration.

This shows the impossibility of providing a grand narrative, or simplistic model, of environmentally induced migration in which farmers experiencing adverse environmental change migrate out of those areas (and livelihoods) affected by environmental deterioration.

The other major structural factor influencing decisions to migrate is the degree to which ethnicity has been politicised in Ethiopia, culminating in ethnic federalism. This policy – where the country is divided up into a number of self-determining, ethnically defined and administered territories – has left people less willing to migrate into regions administered by ethnic groups other than their own. The degree to which these large structural factors influence migration is clear in the fact that the majority of urban migrants who cited environmental change as a principal factor driving their migration tended to be young, without dependents and migrating within the local region.

Conclusion

Environmental change may very well be capable of forcing migration. It appears, however, that factors other than environmental change will be important in mediating migration and that the majority of these factors will be located in social structures which regulate access to those resources perceived to increase the chance of improving livelihood security post-migration.

Given the likely mix of social and environmental factors that will be required in order to drive migration, we should be wary of focusing too heavily on trying to identify migrants who have migrated solely for environmental reasons. To do so might obscure the fact that large-scale environmental change will, in all likelihood, precipitate large-scale forced migrations which could leave both sending and receiving areas the poorer.

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1. The town of Weldiya and its surrounds, in North Welo province in the Amhara administrative region.

2. These accounts were gathered during fieldwork in the northeastern Ethiopian highlands conducted in the rainy season of 2007.