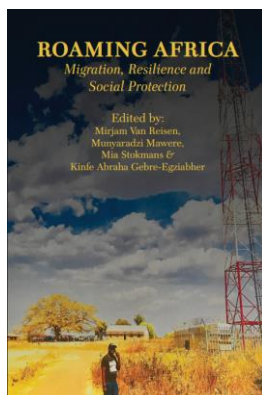


# All or Nothing: The Costs of Migration from the Horn of Africa – Evidence from Ethiopia

*Kinfe Abraha Gebre-Egziabher*

## Chapter in: Roaming Africa: Migration, Resilience and Social Protection

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## Chapter 2

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### All or Nothing: The Costs of Migration from the Horn of Africa – Evidence from Ethiopia

*Kinfe Abraha Gebre-Egziabher*

#### Introduction

In Africa, migration has a long tradition and exhibits a wide variety of patterns. Some migrants and refugees pursue seasonal agricultural activities that involve crossing borders regularly and over long periods of time. Others migrate for shorter periods as a reaction to changes in economic conditions, as a means of gaining experience or training, or to save for a future investment. Individuals or whole families may choose to settle in other African countries to attain a better way of life. Or people may migrate to Europe, America, or Asia on a short-term or long-term basis. Crossing borders for the purpose of trading is also common in Africa and, depending on the length of stay, may or may not be thought of as migration. Travel for cross-border trading also occurs between Africa and Europe.

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*In the first decade and a half of this century, Ethiopia is estimated to have lost at least a million productive people (mostly youth) and billions of US dollars to smugglers and human traffickers, along the three main routes: the Northern, Southern and Eastern migration routes. Pressure from smugglers and traffickers is emerging as a new cause of migration. Smugglers and traffickers are aggressively 'selling' a very bad product that entails high risks at a very high price. In order to stop this disturbing trend we need to create employable youths and employment opportunities and promote investment at home in Ethiopia. At the same time, stronger persecution is needed to rid the Horn of smugglers and traffickers, which requires strengthening of the rule of law.*

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In recent years the Horn of Africa has been an epicentre of immense migratory and refugee movement. Irregular migration from the Horn is mixed in nature, which means that it includes labour migrants (individuals who seek a better life), smuggled and trafficked individuals, unaccompanied minors, refugees and asylum seekers (Schröder, 2015; UNHCR, 2016; Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017). As it is becoming increasingly difficult for Africans to legally arrive and work in Europe, every year tens of thousands of Africans attempt to circumvent border controls and enter illegally as irregular migrants (Reitano, Adal & Shaw, 2014).

Ethiopia is one of the main source countries for migrants and refugees in the Horn of Africa. It is a demographic giant with an estimated total population of nearly 102 million people in 2016. Ethiopia is the second most populous nation in Africa, next to Nigeria (Population Reference Bureau, 2016). The overwhelming majority of Ethiopia's population is made up of youth (of aged 15–34), with an estimated two million people entering the labour market each year (Carter & Rohwerder, 2016). One of the world's oldest civilisations, Ethiopia is also one of the world's poorest countries. As stipulated in the report of the first Growth and Transformation Plan, the country's annual average per capita income increased from USD 377 in 2009/2010 to USD 691 by 2014/15 (National Planning Commission, 2016). However, the per capital income in Ethiopia is substantially lower than the regional average.

Over the past decade, the Ethiopian economy has experienced strong and broad-based growth, averaging 10.8% per year from 2003/04 to 2014/15, compared to the regional average of about 5% during the same period. The proportion of the population living below the poverty line fell from 38.7% in 2003/04 to 23.4% in 2014/15 (National Planning Commission, 2016). The Government of Ethiopia is currently implementing the second phase of its Growth and Transformation Plan. The plan, which will run from 2015/16 to 2019/20, aims to continue improvements in physical infrastructure and transform the country into a manufacturing hub. The overarching goal is to turn Ethiopia into a lower middle-income

country by 2025. Growth targets are comparable to those under the previous plan, with annual average gross domestic product (GDP) growth of 11%. In line with this manufacturing strategy, the industrial sector is slated to grow by 20% per annum on average (National Planning Commission, 2016).

Despite this promising progress, Ethiopia has faced enormous challenges in recent years. One of the challenges is the irregular migration of its youth, including trafficking and smuggling. Despite economic liberalisation and Ethiopia's integration into the global economy, many Ethiopians consider out-migration as the only way to achieve a better standard of living (De Regt & Tafesse, 2016). The geostrategic situation of Ethiopia makes it a source, destination, and transit hub for migration and refugee flows, mostly within the region, but also to South Africa (Southern Route), the Gulf countries and Middle East (Eastern Route), and Europe (Northern Route). Ethiopian migrants often choose irregular means of migration because it is perceived to be less bureaucratic and time consuming, cheaper and more likely to be successful (Frouws, Munge, Danish Refugee Council, & RMMS, 2014).

The main objective of this research is to document the reasons for migration from Ethiopia to the rest of the world via different routes and identify the costs of each route. To meet the research objectives, the following questions are posed: *What are the reasons for the migration of youth from Ethiopia? How is migration facilitated? And what are the costs and risks of migration from Ethiopia via the three main routes?* These questions are addressed in turn in sections 5, 6 and 7.

## **Methodology**

The study used both primary and secondary data sources to investigate migration, including irregular migration, along the three main migration routes from Ethiopia: the Southern Route (to South Africa), Eastern Route (to the Middle East and Gulf countries) and the Northern Route (to Libya, Sudan, Israel, and Europe). The main qualitative methods used were individual in-depth interviews and

focus group discussions. These were supplemented by a quantitative survey of household heads.

## **Theories of migration**

Throughout the history of migration, theorists have been concerned with the causes of migration and the reasons why people decide to migrate from their place of origin. As a result, there is no single decision-making theory for migration, but a number of different ones that deal with the kind of mental processes that people go through when they decide to migrate. Two examples of decision-making theories of migration are: the push-pull theory and the perceptions theory.

Proponents of the first theory argue that the desire of most people to get ahead in life is the most influential factor that determines the decision to migrate. The theory describes the causes of migration as a series of forces that encourage an individual to leave one place (push factors) and reside in another (pull factors). This approach takes into account the imbalance between the place of origin and the place of destination, and considers the migration flows towards areas believed to be desirable for either economic or non-economic reasons through an interplay of push factors at the place of origin and pull factors at the place of destination.

According to this theory, migration is a form of livelihood and income diversification. On the pull side, youth are attracted by the 'glamorous' life in more developed countries, often motivated by the stories of friends, peers and relatives. These people form a network that facilitates the movement of youth out of the villages and small urban areas towards other countries, often crossing borders illegally. With the many push factors in the Horn of Africa (e.g., poverty, unemployment), youth are easily drawn to follow the three main routes of migration. The human capital model views migration as an investment decision based on a cost-benefit analysis. According to this model, it is only when the net benefit is greater than the cost



that people migrate, assuming full employment at the place of destination.

The perception theory purports that people migrate not because they know, but because they perceive (rightly or wrongly) that the place to which they wish to migrate is better than the place in which they are living. This is based on the assumption that migration is a function of how migrants and refugees cognise their present and future places of residence. In this regard, migration is more of an attitudinal thing, in the sense that it depends on the way people, especially youth, see themselves (their inner potential) and their surroundings – past and future – as well as how they see other countries that they are planning to emigrate to.

However, the migration observed in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa seems to follow none of these theories or models. The people interviewed from Tigray, Ethiopia for this study reported that many youth are migrating because of the influence of traffickers and smugglers. The influence of human traffickers and smugglers is not included in these theories and models.

### **Migration and human trafficking in the Horn of Africa**

Nowadays, smugglers and human traffickers are playing an increasing role in migration. Groups who are particularly at risk include undocumented migrants and refugees and unaccompanied minors. Although it is difficult to know the number of irregular Ethiopian migrants and refugees, the brutal beheading of 30 Ethiopians (and Eritreans) in Libya by the terrorist group Islamic State (ISIS), mass deportation of more than 165,000 from Saudi Arabia, and killings in South Africa and Yemen are among the recent tragedies and signal the severity of the problem (IOM, 2014b; Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). Communities and administrative bodies alike are reporting their deep concern about the alarming surge in irregular migration (mostly smuggling, but also trafficking) of young women and men including children, particularly girls.

Migration from the Horn of Africa has been fuelled by various socioeconomic and environmental factors. Some migrants and refugees use irregular migration channels due to the extreme resource scarcity, caused by environmental change, drought, crop failure, food insecurity and severe poverty, among other things. According to Koser (2010), “For some people irregularity is a deliberate choice or decision, but many others find themselves in an irregular situation because of lack of information or due to administrative obstacles”. There are also reports of people who used regular channels to out-migrate from the Horn of Africa, but ended up in exploitative situations, or being subjected to abuse, abduction and extortion during their journey or at their final destination. Thus, mixed migration flows from the Horn of Africa are comprised of people with different profiles and varying levels of vulnerability. These include: migrant workers (both regular and irregular), smuggled migrants and refugees, victims of exploitation and abuse, asylum seekers, people seeking to reunite with their families and refugees. According to the Global Commission on International Migration:

*The term ‘irregular migration’ is commonly used to describe a variety of different phenomena involving people who enter or remain in a country of which they are not a citizen in breach of national laws. These include migrants who enter or remain in a country without authorization, those who are smuggled or trafficked across an international border, unsuccessful asylum seekers who fail to observe a deportation order and people who circumvent immigration controls through the arrangement of bogus marriages. (GCIM, 2005, p. 32)*

To address the potential threat posed by the unprecedented swelling of migrants and refugees, human trafficking and smuggling, different destination countries have taken enormous steps to reduce the number of immigrants. However, noticeable change has not been observed in terms of the direction and flow of migrants and refugees. Instead, migration has become more complicated, dynamic and mixed in nature (AB, interview with Gebre-Egziabher, face-to-face, Tigray, Ethiopia, 2017).

## Reasons for migration

Studies have found that poverty and low income, unemployment, peer and family pressure, inducement by traffickers and smugglers, and rampant corruption are the key drivers of irregular migration from Ethiopia (Tadelle, 2016; IOM, 2014a). Other studies cite the role of development processes, state formation and policies (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016), as well as high population growth, oppressive political contexts, and insecurity and internal conflicts as drivers (Carter & Rohwerder, 2016; IGAD, 2015). This study found that the reasons for migration are interwoven with each other.

The participants identified the main reasons for migration from the study sites as follows:

- **Lack of job opportunities:** Respondents pointed to the lack of job opportunities and their economically-poor family background as drivers of irregular migration in all of the places of origin. Furthermore, many youth consider migration to be a livelihood strategy and the only way to fulfil their future ambitions.
- **Family and peer pressure:** Family and peer pressure were also found to be factors pushing youth to out-migrate.
- **Refugee camps nearby:** The presence of refugee camps nearby (mainly in the Northern Route) was also mentioned as promoting international migration. Eritrean refugees and youth from host communities interact at sporting events, the cinema and other social gatherings, which allows Eritreans to share their migration experiences with Ethiopian youth. Many respondents mentioned that before the establishment of the camps, there was not so much youth out-migration to Europe and other countries, except to Sudan. Respondents said that those who migrate to Sudan usually come back and invest at home. So, international migration via the Northern Route is a very recent phenomenon, highly influenced by the presence of the Eritrean refugees in the camps.

- Smugglers and traffickers:** According to a key informant, smugglers and traffickers play a major role in migration from all of the study sites. Smugglers and traffickers are everywhere, and their communication is often hidden and secretive. Some smugglers and traffickers even offer to cover the migration expenses of youth, if they agree to repay them after they reach Europe; this situation is most common in the Northern Route.

Explaining the causes of irregular migration, commander BA from Tigray stated that “youths in the zone are suffering from poverty and unemployment, and they are taking irregular migration as the only possible way-out (BA, interview by Gebre-Egziabher, face-to-face, Tigray, Ethiopia, 2017).

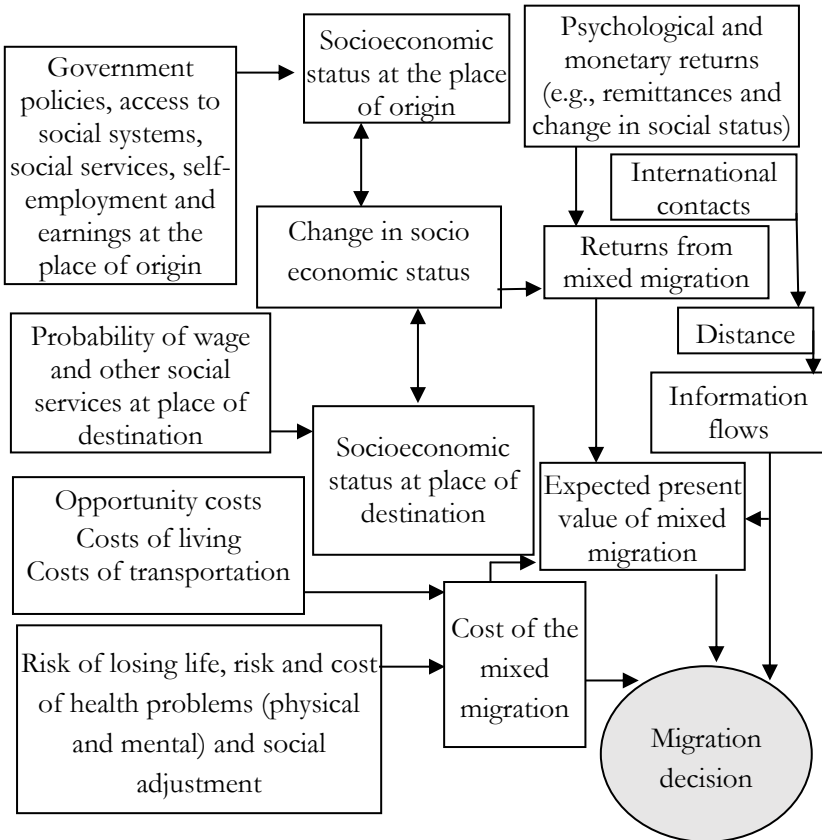


Figure 2.1. Framework for analysing the factors and costs in the decision to migrate

One of the long-term solutions to the problem is to create employable youth in the country, which requires equipping youth with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes required by the market. Of course, youth also need employment opportunities. Even though poverty and unemployment were high everywhere, international migration was lower in some areas than others. This may be due to strong family and community ties and their attitude towards migration and irregular migration, as well as the presence of smugglers and human traffickers.

The majority of those who out-migrate are from rural areas and poor family backgrounds. Some respondents also mentioned that community leaders in some areas have better awareness about the consequences of irregular migration and try to make society aware of these. Thus, poverty and unemployment seem to be (in most cases) a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for migration. On the other hand, it was observed that many youngsters know the risks involved in irregular migration, but still decide to out-migrate.

The information that migrants and refugees receive seems to be a critical factor in driving them into the hands of smugglers and human traffickers. A policeman by the name BC explained that

*[...] human traffickers have a very strong ability to convince people, mainly the youth. Especially the experienced human traffickers can convince the youth that the sheep which is in front of them is actually a dog, not a sheep. (BC, interview by Gebre-Egziabher, face-to-face, Tigray, Ethiopia, 2017)*

The causes of migration are highly entwined, with the presence of smugglers and human traffickers as an increasing relevant factor nudging potential migrants and refugees by promising to facilitate their journey.

## Facilitation of migration

The respondents explain that traffickers and smugglers are present everywhere and their inducements and encouragements prompt people to migrate. This appeared relevant in all the three routes investigated. The respondents said that those involved in trafficking and smuggling have built networks that stretch from the rural areas and small towns in all the places of origin to the destination countries. The respondents alleged that some of the traffickers and smugglers have close links with some local, regional and federal government officials, including police and security forces. Human trafficking in the Horn of Africa is a lucrative business.

Many traffickers are getting rich due to this business. The trade is so large that government officials and law enforcement bodies may also be involved. The comments of commander BA, who is from one of the towns in the north-west of Tigray, Ethiopia, support this view:

*A trafficker by the name GM was suspected by the police who were mandated to deal with preventing human trafficking. He was imprisoned for his deeds. After fulfilling all the necessary judicial and legal formalities, police checked the balance of his bank account and obtained that the amount of money in his saving account was ETB 32,309,482 [USD 1,468,612.82]. The trafficker GM is an ordinary person, from a small town in Tigray and there is no sign that he owns a business firm registered by his name. Besides, there is also no indication that the needed taxes are paid for the money that he saved in his account. GM had four different ID cards with four different names, but the same photograph. His case was presented to the court and the court released him by giving appointment for another time. Then he went out of country, and we don't know where he is now. (BA, interview by Gebre-Egziabher, face-to-face, Tigray, Ethiopia, 2017)*

This respondent (Commander BA) said that the police suspected that the Ethiopian birr (ETB) 32 million in the traffickers account was obtained by selling people for slavery.

Understanding the routes that irregular migrants and refugees are taking to reach their destinations is a complex task, as migration from

the Horn of Africa is extremely dynamic. Explaining this situation, Horwood (2009, p. 41) states as follows: “The routes used by the smugglers are often changing at short notice, and hence are very dynamic”. However, generally speaking, three main routes are used: the Southern, Eastern and Northern Routes.

In some circumstances, returnee migrants and the refugees themselves act as traffickers and smugglers. When smugglers recruit potential migrants and refugees, they study the economic background of the migrant’s parents and target those who are from economically well-to-do families. After they cross the border, they force the migrants and refugees to call to their parents and ask them to send money for ransom. If their parents are not able to send the money demanded by the smugglers, the migrants and refugees are exposed to serious inhumane actions, including torture, rape, beatings, and other forms of punishment, which dehumanise the individuals, and even killing. These practices occur in all three of the routes mentioned in the previous section (AC, interview with Gebre-Egziabher, face-to-face, Tigray, Ethiopia, 2017).

### **Financial cost of migration**

In financial terms, the routes used by Ethiopians can be categorised into three main groups: expensive routes (mainly to Europe and North America) which require more than USD 7,000, medium-cost routes (Africa and Asia), which require a minimum of USD 4,000, and budget routes (Middle Eastern countries), which require as little as USD 500. Which migration route is used is often up to the smuggler, as explained by the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS, 2017): “Migrants have little influence over which routes they take, with smugglers choosing the routes based on perceptions of safety, levels of violence, ease of transfer to the next stop and levels of corruption likely to be accounted”.

The Southern Route is through Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, and Malawi to South Africa. This route is increasingly used by youth. Mainly Ethiopians and Somalis use this route to migrate to South Africa

(Gebre-Egziabher, Shishay, Kibrom, Atakilty & Kefyalew, 2017a; 2017b). According to RMMS (Frouws & Horwood, 2017), “an estimated number of 14,300 persons emigrate via this route, annually”. The same source also states that, in South African, “80 percent of migrants from the Horn of Africa were Ethiopians and 20 percent Somalis” (Frouws & Horwood, 2017, p. 2). Thus, one can conclude that every year, about 11,440 Ethiopians migrate to South Africa. Gebre-Egziabher *et al.*, (2017a) estimate that “in the last sixteen years, from all over Ethiopia, more than more than 200,000 youths have emigrated to South Africa; via Moyale, crossing the Ethio-Kenya border, via Nairobi, through Tanzania and the like”.

Although “the costs associated with such movements vary considerably and are dependent on the final destination and mode of transport” (Long & Crisp, 2012), Gebre-Egziabher *et al.* (2017a) estimate that migrants and refugees pay smugglers and trafficker Ethiopian birr (ETB) 114,146.73 per person (USD 3,973<sup>1</sup>). Based on this figure, in the last 16 years, in the Southern Route alone, an estimated USD 950 million was paid by Ethiopian migrants to the smugglers and human traffickers on the Southern Route. Had this money been spent in a legal and productive sector, it could have contributed to creating employment for youth and reducing poverty. Assuming that the Somalis also paid a similar amount, it can be roughly estimated that USD 237 million has been paid by Somalis in the last 16 years. This totals USD 1.187 billion paid to smugglers and human traffickers by 228,800 youths from the Horn of Africa (mainly Ethiopia and Somali) who migrated via the Southern Route, with an intended destination of South Africa in the last 16 years.

The Eastern Route takes migrants and refugees towards the Middle East, mainly Saudi Arabia. The Ethiopians use Djibouti and Somali as transit hubs. This route takes youths from the Horn of Africa into Yemen and then to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States and the Middle East. It is exclusively used by Ethiopians and Somalis (Gebre-Egziabher, 2016). According to RMMS (2017), “A total of 813,683

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<sup>1</sup> Using the exchange rate from Oanda.com of 2 August 2019 1 USD = 28.73 ETB



youths have emigrated via the Eastern Route within a decade’s time (between 2006 and 2016) and 72 percent are Ethiopians”. Thus, over half a million (585,852) Ethiopians migrated to the Middle East irregularly from 2006 to 2016. Estimates by the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (Frouws *et al.*, 2014) reveal that, as of December 2013, 65,319 migrants and refugees arrived in Yemen, among which 54,213 (83%) were Ethiopians and 11,045 (16.9%) were Somalis (the remaining 0.1% were from other countries). Frouws *et al.* (2014) reported that:

*Djibouti is the major transit country for Ethiopians travelling irregularly to Yemen and further to Saudi Arabia. In 2012, over 80,000 migrants (78 percent of all arrivals in Yemen) transited via Djibouti, the others transited mostly through Bossaso in Puntland.*

Of course, there are fluctuations from year to year, but the record year this decade was 2016, when 117,107 youths migrated to Yemen, with an intention of continuing to Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. During this time, there was no stability in Yemen (Frouws *et al.*, 2014). Many studies on the Eastern Route have also shown that the disappearance of women and girls is common.

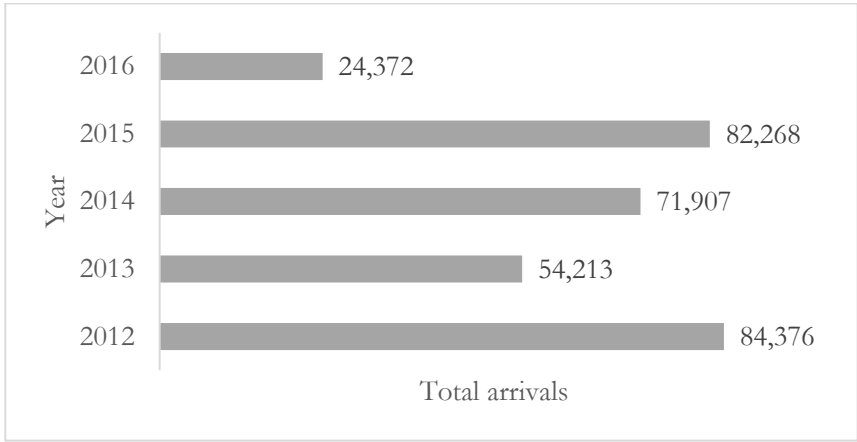


Figure 2.2. Ethiopian arrivals into Yemen (2012–2016)

Source: RMMS (2017)

It can be estimated that in the 15 years from 2000 to 2016 a total of 878,776 Ethiopians migrated to the Middle East at a total cost of USD 439 million (based on USD 500 per migrant)<sup>2</sup>. Hence, cumulatively, for both the Southern and Eastern Routes, more than USD 1.626 billion is estimated to have been paid for irregular migration over this time period (USD 1.187 billion for the Southern Route in the last 16 years and USD 439 million in the Eastern Route in the 15 years from 2000 to 2016).

The Northern Route extends through Sudan, Libya and Egypt. While Libya and Sudan are also final destinations, Libya and Egypt are transit hubs for migrants and refugees travelling to Israel (previously via the Sinai desert) and Europe. This route is regularly used by Ethiopians, Eritreans and Sudanese. Most of the Ethiopians using the Northern Route are from Tigray. The youth who use this route go through Sudan, Libya and Egypt, across the Mediterranean Sea and then finally to Europe. According to RMMS (2017), “in 2016 alone, 40,773 persons from the Horn of Africa arrived in Italy; and out of these 39,953 persons arrived in the months between January and November of 2016”. Eritreans are the largest group using the Northern Route. This is the most risky route and the youth are exposed to the risk of kidnapping, detention, and death while crossing both the desert and the Mediterranean Sea. It is also the most expensive route, and people usually pay around USD 7,000 to arrive at their destination (Frouws *et al.*, 2014). Many people die or disappear on this route and it is hard to estimate the cost per annum. It is also unclear how many of the migrants and refugees using this route are Ethiopians. The costs associated with trafficking on the Northern Route are in the billions of USD over the period 2009–2016 (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017, p. 13, estimated the costs for just Eritrean refugees to Libya, traveling on from Ethiopia and Sudan, as roughly around USD 1 billion in 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> This figure is a rough estimate based on the interviews and focus group discussions conducted for this research.

Hence, although impossible to estimate precisely, the total cost of the facilitation of migrants and refugees on the three routes is in the billions of US dollars. This money could be used for the economic development of the sending countries and would go a long way to creating employment. Tragically, migration represents not just a loss of financial resources, it is also a loss of human resources that the country needs for its economic development.

## **Conclusion**

The main objective of this research was to document the reasons for migration from Ethiopia to the rest of the world via different routes and identify the financial cost of each route. It addressed three questions: *What are the reasons for the migration of youth from Ethiopia? How is migration facilitated? What are the costs of migration from Ethiopia via the three main routes?*

This research identified the following reasons for the increase in migration from Ethiopia: lack of job opportunities; family and peer pressure; the presence of a refugee camps nearby; and the presence of smugglers and traffickers. These reasons were usually intertwined. The importance of the presence of smugglers and traffickers to nudge migrants and refugees is new and has not been previously identified in migration theory, which has traditionally focused on push-pull theory or perceptions. This research shows that the migration process can be regarded as an exchange process in which human traffickers are aggressively selling (using persuasive communication targeting youth) a very bad product (that entails high risks) at a very high price (high costs). The findings of the study show that even though there are differences between the routes, smuggling and human trafficking in the three routes is posing serious risks to the lives of the migrants and refugees, through kidnapping, holding migrants and refugees for ransom, and violation of their basic human rights. In the Horn of Africa, smuggling and human trafficking is a very financially-rewarding business and is run by network(s) of highly-organised criminals. They prey on unemployment and poverty and have compelling narratives that persuade migrants and refugees.

Based on the calculations made in this research, in the first decade and a half of this century, Ethiopia is estimated to have lost at least a million productive people (mostly youth) and billions of US dollars in payments to smugglers and human traffickers, along the three routes. Hence, the issue of mixed migration from Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa is not only costly in monetary terms, but also in terms of human resources and loss of life. This issue has to be given priority and addressed by creating employable youths and employment opportunities. Attention must also be given to poverty reduction, so that youth can secure their basic needs without going abroad. Smugglers and traffickers are playing a significant role in the mixed migration process, which is a transnational problem and must be addressed accordingly. Stronger persecution is necessary to rid the Horn of the problem of smuggling and human trafficking. Thus, there is a need for an integrated and coordinated approach to fight smuggling and human trafficking by country governments in the Horn of Africa together with the Inter-Governmental Agency for Development (IGAD), African Union, European Union and United Nations.

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