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Human Smuggling from Wollo, Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia: *Askoblay* Criminals or Enablers of Dreams?

Abstract

Sensationalist accounts of human smuggling from Ethiopia towards Saudi Arabia allege that operations are controlled by criminal networks who converge in a variety of illegal markets posing a threat to national security. Such convergence narratives construct Ethiopian human smuggling as an organized criminal business that extracts profits from and inflicts violence on vulnerable people seeking a clandestine passage to work in the Gulf States. Our ethnographic research in Wollo, Ethiopia, challenges these narratives by showing that smuggling networks are developed through personalised relationships, based on co-ethnic bonds rather than extended and complex criminal networks. Smuggling has emerged in a particular context of surveillance and enforcement and the motives of smugglers are complex, making simple characterisations difficult. Smuggling is enabled by ethnic links on either side of the border where earnings from facilitation boost incomes in an otherwise impoverished context.

Keywords: Human Smuggling; Ethiopia; Organized Crime; Criminal Networks; Human Trafficking; Horn of Africa

Introduction

Irregular migration from Ethiopia towards Djibouti and Yemen and onwards to Saudi Arabia is now larger than migration towards Europe.¹ ² The International Organization for Migration estimates that nearly 150,000 migrants arrived in Yemen in 2018³ with most planning to travel to the Middle East to work as domestic workers, gardeners, shepherds and security guards. A majority of these migrants are undocumented. Saudi Arabia has recently emerged as the destination of choice and figures from the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs show that 60-70% of all migrants in 2012 had irregular status⁴ The dominance of irregular migration has multiple explanations including prolonged bans on migration to the Middle East which were introduced due to concerns about the abuse and exploitation of migrants, especially domestic workers.⁵ The most recent ban was rescinded in early 2019 when it was realised that migration had continued, often at greater costs and risks than before. Avoiding the Kafala system of labour recruitment in the Middle East which ties workers to a

¹ The other significant migration flows from Ethiopia are westwards towards the Sudan, Libya and onwards to Europe and southwards towards South Africa via Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique.
particular sponsor and requires that they return home after a prescribed period is another reason for irregularity. Research by Atnafu⁶ as well as other studies of migrant labour in the Gulf⁷ show that remaining irregular with all its attendant risks is often more acceptable to migrants than going back home to uncertainty, poverty and unemployment. Finally, the difficulties of accessing formal travel documents and permissions in rural areas are also a factor that has contributed to this trend. As a result, there has been a consolidation of informal migration and smuggling facilitation especially in rural areas.

While aspiring migrants and their families in Ethiopia describe informal migration facilitators as *Berri Kefoch* or “door openers”⁸ and *Askoblay* or “migrant helpers,” state and media representations, fuelled by transnational crime control agencies such as ENACT,⁹ have conflated the activities of migration facilitators with a range of criminal activities including

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⁶ An earlier survey conducted by one of the authors in 2015 in Kombolcha supports this claim as irregular migrants in Saudi Arabia felt they could move into jobs where they earned more and worked less hours.
⁹ Interpol/ENACT (2018). *Overview of Serious and Organized Crime in East Africa.* Interpol/ENACT. ENACT analyses the scale of organized crime and its impact on security, governance and development across Africa. It is funded by the European Union and implemented by INTERPOL, the Institute for Security Studies, in partnership with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.
money laundering and drug trafficking which we discuss in detail below. Linking migration facilitation to transnational crime and posing it as a threat to national peace and security has provided the justification for the criminalisation of the activities of migration facilitators.

This situation of contrasting narratives is not unique to Ethiopia. Research in a wide variety of country and cultural contexts shows that criminological and legal analyses of migration facilitation that heavily influence state policies on irregular migration tend to oversimplify the relationship between facilitators and migrants without understanding the process from the perspective of migrants, facilitators and migration communities. Policy discourses remain suspicious of migration facilitation and construct facilitators as greedy and ruthless, driven by profit alone. Yet a growing body of scholarship from different continents demonstrates the social embeddedness of migration facilitation and the hazy boundaries between profiteering and altruism.

Our research challenges mainstream representations by showing that migration facilitation is smaller in scale, embedded in local economies and cultures and operated by facilitators who are often as precarious as the people whose journeys they facilitate. We present the perspectives of those who are actually involved in the process of migration facilitation which stands in sharp contrast to state and agency perspectives that are conditioned by legal and criminological perspectives.

The paper is based on research carried out in Wollo, in Northeastern Ethiopia, which has emerged as one of the most important points of origin for migrants travelling to the Middle East via Djibouti. While earlier studies in Ethiopia showed “step migration” from rural areas to Addis Ababa and then to the Middle East, the trend has now shifted to migration directly from rural areas such as Wollo. Secondary data indicate a significant percentage of migrants travelling the Djibouti-Yemen route come from Wollo. In 2013-14 Saudi Arabia deported 163,000 irregular Ethiopian migrants, and 34,164 of them were from Wollo, accounting for more than 20 percent of the irregular migrants from Ethiopia in Saudi Arabia. Many of the 2100 Ethiopians stranded in Yemen who were offered IOM assistance to return in June 2019, were also from Wollo.

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17 IOM. (2019). *Over 2,100 Ethiopian Migrants Return Home from Yemen with IOM Support*. 
We provide a bottom up and grounded picture of migration facilitation to debunk notions of organized crime and provided a more nuanced picture of facilitators. We provide evidence to discredit accusations of the two main ways in which organized crime allegedly takes place namely market diversification and operation as a closed system which is out of bounds for others. Furthermore, we show that the profits if any from migration facilitation are usually ploughed back into the community for the wider benefit of everyone and not just the facilitators.

Methods

The empirical evidence on which this paper is based was gathered under a research project on the migration industry in Ethiopia, commissioned by the UK Aid funded Migrating out of Poverty (MOOP) Research Programme Consortium. The study was conducted in three major migrant origin locations (Addis Ababa, Hadya and Wollo) and three transit towns near borders with other countries (Desheto, Metema and Moyale). This paper is reporting the findings of the data gathered mainly from Wollo and Desheto, as the place of origin and transit for migrants heading east towards Saudi Arabia.

The interviews in Wollo were conducted to gain insights into the organization of migration at origin, the personal bonds and social relationships as well as expectations between aspiring migrants, their families, brokers, smugglers and other intermediaries. They help us understand how brokers and smugglers are viewed in the community and also how money is transferred between different parts of the smuggling industry. The border town of Desheto is important to study as it is the first transit for the migrants’ over land journey from Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia. It is where migrants, initially encounter multiple barriers to mobility including border control agencies such as border guards and immigration officials.

The data was collected over three months of fieldwork conducted between March and December 2018 in Wollo. We held focus group discussions and conducted in-depth interviews with aspiring migrants, deportees, returnees, families of migrants, informal brokers, law enforcement officials, border guards, immigration officials, international organizations and local NGOs. In total we interviewed two lead smugglers, two border guards, 16 officials/personnel working in migration related government offices and three NGOs/ international organizations engaged in migration management. In addition, 25 aspiring migrants including deportees (as most try to remigrate very soon), 23 families of migrants, 20 returnees and three migrants en route were interviewed.

The migration context in Wollo

Migration in Wollo must be situated in its historical, agroecological and socio-economic context. Both provinces of Wollo (north and south) have very poor and degraded soils and have suffered from periodic famines of which the worst occurred in the 1970s and 80s with disastrous consequences for rural livelihoods. Hundreds of thousands of families were resettled by the state in different parts of Ethiopia and many migrated to areas where they could access remunerative work. The economically vibrant port City of Assab on the Red Sea became a popular destination and onwards migration to Saudi Arabia via Yemen began.

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18 There are complex reasons for remigration include feelings of shame because of unsuccessful migration and the lack of opportunities locally.
20 Assab port later became part of Eritrea.
at this time. Additionally, Wollo had a religious connection with Saudi Arabia through Haji and Umrah pilgrimages and many travelling there overstayed their visas. The geographical proximity of Wollo to Saudi Arabia is also an important enabling factor for migration as Northern Wollo is situated less than one hundred kilometres from the Red Sea. Until Eritrean independence in 1991 cut Assab off from Ethiopia, many of the labourers in the city were from Wollo. Access to the Red Sea port of Assab was completely blocked due to the Eritrea-Ethiopia war of 1998-2000, when migrants began to travel via Djibouti which is about 400 kilometres from Wollo.

In the face of worsening socio-economic conditions and multiple connections with Saudi Arabia, the youth of Wollo consider migration to the Middle East as one of the few viable options for improving the living standards of their families. In the past ten years, longstanding rural poverty has been compounded by a high level of graduate unemployment. In this situation, families invest in the migration of one household member to diversify their sources of income and provide a safety net against hunger, food insecurity, drought and unemployment. Positive images about migration and the diaspora often circulate in family narratives and it is in this social and economic context that young people begin to look at migration as a window of opportunity through which personal, family and social goals can be fulfilled. Additionally, the physical evidence of migration successes is visible: a village on the outskirts of Mersa, a small town on a route to Djibouti, is called Dubai Sefer (quarter), indicating that it has been built with remittances from the Gulf. Such is the importance of migration in the imaginations of the people of Wollo that even civil servants have left their jobs preferring to migrate to the Middle East.

Jobs in the Middle East are highly gendered: women are preferred for affective labour such as domestic work (food preparation, child and home care), and men are employed in jobs considered to be suited to their physical capabilities such as agricultural labour, driving, and working as security guards. Although much better paid than available work back home, the condition of undocumented migrants remains precarious at destination. Saudi Arabia which is the most important Gulf destination for Ethiopian migrants at present has undertaken deportation drives periodically in response to the large numbers of irregular migrants in the country with the last one in 2013-14 when 163,000 Ethiopian domestic workers were deported back to Ethiopia.

Despite their precarity, these jobs are much sought after. While migrants usually state that they are migrating to improve the living standards of their families as that is the culturally accepted reason, there are personal goals that also drive migration including, particularly for women, a desire to escape patriarchal power relations and early marriage and also to increase personal independence. Divorced women are socially stigmatised in Ethiopia

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21 Getachew (2016).
22 Getachew (2016); Sisay (2019).
23 Abebaw, M. (2012). Trafficked to the Gulf States: The Experiences of Ethiopian Returnee Women. *Journal of Community Practice* 20(1-2): 112-133. After crossing the Djibouti border migrants walk for two days to reach the Red Sea and cross the Gulf of Aden by boat to Yemen which takes from 4-6 hours. From the coast of Yemen to Jasmen (the first border town in Saudi Arabia, the trip takes a full day by car or 10-15 days on foot).
25 Getachew (2016).
and they are also more likely to migrate to escape such pressures and also because their economic conditions deteriorate after divorce.28

Migration and smuggling facilitators have become critical to achieving these goals. On the other hand, the prospects of women earning large amounts of money through migration has created pressures on them to migrate and, husbands may invest in irregular migration and recruit facilitators. One 25-year-old returnee said “My husband wanted me to go to Saudi. He paid the broker 4000 ETB [190 USD] at that time.” Other accounts suggested that the families of women are keen on husbands allowing their wives to migrate to benefit financially from their migration, and often insisted on prenuptial contracts with that condition. Women on the other hand may or may not personally benefit from such arrangements as the interviews show they must defer to the male head of the household on remittances spending decisions.

For those who are unable to migrate due to age restrictions, smugglers are critical. An adult male participant of a focus group discussion said “My two daughters decided to migrate when they were fourteen. I advised them to continue their education, but they refused. I decided to sell my cattle and send them through legal route. They planned to go to Dubai but were rejected because they were just fourteen at that time. Then we opted to the other alternative - the broker. He said he can send them to Kuwait.”

Thus, while rural communities in Wollo have rushed to embrace the opportunities offered by migration, the government has erected a number of barriers to movement in response to concerns of rising irregular migration from Africa and its links to transnational crime.

Criminalization processes in Ethiopia

The criminalisation of human smuggling facilitation

The adoption of the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Air and Sea, under the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, together with the Protocol on Human Trafficking gave states the license to criminalise migrant smuggling and various activities associated with it such as the falsification of travel documents. Linking migrant smuggling to transnational organized crime has allowed states to characterize migrant smuggling as a threat to public order and national security29 and justify the militarization of borders.30 In East Africa moral panics about smuggling have also spawned accusations of the transnational convergence of forms of organized crime, including human trafficking and smuggling and violent extremism.31 The evidence for these claims is never provided. The criminalisation of smuggling is justified on the grounds that smuggling can become trafficking when migrants are held hostage, beaten or killed (p. 6).

In 2015 Ethiopia adopted the “Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants Proclamation No. 909/2015.” The proclamation introduced tough regulations and punishments for those accused of engaging in any activities related to brokering and smuggling of migrants including rigorous imprisonment of 15 to 25 years and

31 Interpol/ENACT, 2018
a fine of between 6000 and 11,000 USD. Assisting potential migrants to get ID cards, arranging transportation and renting one’s house to migrants en route became punishable under the new law. Putting the issue of human smuggling squarely within the purview of criminological approaches, a new law on human trafficking and smuggling was adopted recently with support from Regional Office in Eastern Africa of the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime which gives the government further powers and resources to eradicate the facilitation of irregular migration.

A number of “anti-human trafficking taskforces” have been established at all tiers of the government from the office of the Deputy Prime Minister to district levels. Every zone and district have established these task forces and the chief administrators of zones and districts are heading the task forces. The structure extends to villages where the community, elders, religious leaders and clan heads have been organized to prevent “illegal migration.” These local groups are instructed to report any act of migration facilitation, including the families and brokers who organize departures and smuggling in the border towns. Checkpoints have been set up along major routes to intercept migrants and smugglers. As a result, thousands of individuals have been detained at places of origin and transit border towns. In 2017 and 2018, 84 brokers (73 males and 7 females) were detained in the Kombolcha district of Wollo, which is an important place of origin for Gulf migrants. At the same time, 54 smugglers (43 males and 11 females) were detained en route in Afar suspected of smuggling and guiding migrants to Djibouti. In the same year, the Afar Regional State Police Commission intercepted 4082 migrants.

The public discourse started to focus on the supposed immorality and profiteering of smugglers who were exploiting vulnerable migrants and their families. Examples of the use of violence by smugglers were also publicised -- beatings, rape, kidnappings for ransom and abandonment in the desert. The discursive association between human smuggling and crime is critical to sustaining and justifying the securitisation of borders and combatting what is also constructed as the business model of smuggling. Distinct narratives on smuggling are identifiable as we discuss next.

**Dominant narratives about human smuggling**

*Externally funded agencies*

Agency reports on human smuggling in Ethiopia suggest that smugglers in the country and in neighbouring countries are controlled through a pyramidal structure to organized crime in Libya and other lawless locations such as Yemen where smuggling kingpins can operate unchecked. Sahan, an organization that advises the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development in East Africa (IGAD) advises: “…irregular migration from the Horn of Africa is dominated by highly integrated networks of transnational organised criminal groups.

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33 Sisay (2019), pp. 36-37.
Coordinated by kingpins based abroad, these networks ‘recruit’ their clients via schools, the Internet and word of mouth; they corrupt government officials to ensure seamless travel across borders.37 These claims are repeated by the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat.38 In another influential report Reitano and Tinti39 also link smuggling to “violent groups seeking to destabilise states and threaten communities. In doing so, they create contexts in which demand for their services thrives. Smuggling networks are quick to identify new areas of insecurity, and prey on the vulnerable displaced populations with false promises of new lives and bright futures.”

The links between human smuggling and money laundering for funding other criminal activities is also a popular conjecture seen in such reports. In the same report Sahan states “Money to secure the transport of passengers through Ethiopia and into Sudan is handled by hawala agents controlled in large part by a Khartoum-based Somali known as HA (pseudonym). From Khartoum, HA arranges money transfers to the Somaliland border town of Tug Wajaale where the money is cashed out to finance the transportation network that feeds across Ethiopia into Sudan”40. None of these reports adequately include the voice of the migrants and their families or of those they accuse of engaging in transnational organized criminal networks.

Media Reporting

International news agency reporting on irregular migration from Wollo to Saudi is replete with examples of extreme violence and extortion – kidnapping for ransom, beatings to extract money from the families of migrants, selling migrants into slavery and the rape of women by smugglers.41 They highlight the worst cases of abuse and portray them as representative of the general experience of migrants travelling through Djibouti and Yemen.

*He told his captors he didn’t have a number, because he knew that couldn’t ask his father for more money. He was beaten and left without food or water for days, weeks even. One night, one of the captors beat his leg to a pulp with a steel rod. Then, he was dumped in the desert. A passing driver brought him to a hospital, where his leg was amputated.*42

Media releases from Ethiopian government agencies on the issue of irregular migration facilitation were comparatively thin and we were unable to source any even through direct contact with the Illegal Migration Department in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Only a couple of news agencies carried original articles about the arrest and of traffickers;43 in most cases the rhetoric appeared to be driven mainly by international agencies such as AP and Reuters whose reports were reproduced in local newspapers. Thus, the characterisation of irregular migration facilitators as traffickers migrants as victims with no agency was constantly reinforced.

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Our research shows that the empirical basis for these assertions is extremely tenuous. One reason is that empirical research on the process of smuggling at points of origin and border towns has been scarce. Given the lack of empirical evidence, analyses are frequently based on extrapolating and generalising negative incidents highlighted in the press. Few studies have bothered to conduct research on the social basis of human smuggling and the relationship between those who use their services and those who offer them. There is a dearth of research on human smuggling within countries of origin or at critical transit points where different sets of actors are encountered and where the rules of the game may shift. This absence is especially noticeable in the Horn of Africa, and specifically in the case of Ethiopia.44

Community Narratives

In sharp contrast to the portrayal of human smuggling as a form of transnational organized criminal networks, community narratives about human smuggling in Ethiopia show that aspiring migrants, their families and the wider community regard smugglers as benefactors and smuggling as essential to realise their dreams. This does not mean that people are unaware of smugglers’ economic interests and the possibility of being exploited and deceived by their facilitators during the course of the journey. Ethnographic research on Eritrean and Ethiopian migration towards Sweden,45 as well as Ethiopia to South Africa46 illustrates these ambivalent feelings. However, with the exception of a handful of such studies, the extant literature on human smuggling and trafficking out of Ethiopia is focused on assessments of volumes and routes.47

Next, we will discuss the context of migration departure and processes of human smuggling from Wollo and analyse dis/prove the convergence between human smuggling from Wollo and criminal networks.

Findings

The social organization of smuggling from Wollo

The territory east of Wollo is lowland semi-arid and arid and is inhabited by a nomadic Afar ethnic group whose settlement and grazing area traverses the Ethiopia-Djibouti border. As we discuss below, their presence on both sides of the border as well as indigenous knowledge of the landscape is critical for smuggling operations. Smuggling facilitation is fluid and dynamic with the ability to respond to policy changes. Until 2013, when the Government of Ethiopia started its organized campaign against trafficking and smuggling, brokering was practised openly.

46 Fekadu et al. (2019).
Smuggling facilitation in the villages where migrants came from was embedded in the everyday social structure and involved ordinary people who held jobs and positions that were part of the village and district hierarchy. Ironically, the criminalisation of brokerage and smuggling facilitation has changed the structure of the industry from a more horizontal and loosely organised local structure to a more pyramidal structure with lead brokers sitting in far-away locations to avoid detection and commanding their subordinates who operate clandestinely in Ethiopia. Prior to the crackdown of 2013, lead smugglers were found in the key towns such as Kombolcha, Dessie and Woldiya connecting migrants to other countries. Since 2013, some have been imprisoned, and others went underground by changing their places of residence. Consequently, migrants are having to rely on more dangerous journeys and methods of facilitation.48

Thus, rather than being created by external organised criminal networks, the current structure of the facilitation industry has emerged in response to the adverse circumstances created by policy.

An open system

The lead smuggler or delala who was often based in another location relied on local brokers or recruiters known as askoblay in villages and small towns. The class and ethnic background of the migrants and the local smugglers is similar with low levels of education and relatively poor families. The success of migration facilitation usually depends on the trust based on co-ethnic or kinship and religious bonds. While migrants described the facilitators as benefactors they also know that the relationship is based profit-making. The boundaries between altruistic and profiteering behaviours are rather fluid with the latter being kept in check by the community to which both the migrant and the facilitator belong. There is evidence of a moral economy in the villages that we visited, with societal checks on immoral behaviour of brokers and smugglers. Thus, if a smuggler takes an advance payment but fails to support their clients throughout the journey through their network (described below), the facilitator would be regarded as dishonest and immoral and this would result in a dispute between the migrant’s family and theirs. Others are regarded as immoral when they put their clients in the hands of facilitators in Djibouti or Yemen who lack established networks and the ability to protect the migrant along the route. In such instances, the facilitators are blacklisted by the community so that others do not suffer the same fate. In extreme cases where the migrant has died on route, the facilitators have run away from the area to escape being lynched by the community. The media and migration control agencies dwell on such evil characters for their characterisations of facilitators but the reality is far more complex. Moral checks on facilitator behaviour work because the contract is between two families or kin groups rather than individuals and this is backed up by customary dispute resolution mechanisms. For this reason, migrants always prefer a local facilitator or someone belonging to their ethnic group rather than an outsider. As facilitators are inhabitants of the same villages or area as the migrants, they are also acutely aware that their acts are consequential. Any perception that they lack honesty, would result in a loss of clients which would threaten their business in a competitive environment. Trust is a crucial element of underground businesses such as human smuggling and the success of facilitators depends on their reputation and demonstrable success stories.

The official rhetoric frames the process of recruitment as deception or force, akin to being trafficked whereas in reality a majority of migrants either seek out brokers themselves

or their families do that for them, especially in the case of women. The acceptance of brokers by the aspiring migrants and their families depends on their ability to inspire trust in their effectiveness in helping them realize their dreams and projects. In small towns and transit areas where migration departures and journeys are organized, smugglers’ reputations are built through re/distributing the small resources they obtain from brokerage. We elaborate on this point later in the paper. The askoblay connect with receivers (teqebayoch) in the district towns whose job is to host departing migrants in safe houses until a sufficient number of migrants has been built up to attempt the first leg of the journey out of the country. Almost anyone with an understanding of the outside world and the ability to communicate can become an askoblay or teqebayoch and they include people from all walk of life such as civil servants, teachers, contractors, young farmers, religious teachers and traders. Most have regular jobs in various sectors and professions and smuggling facilitation in most cases is a side business that they engage in to supplement their incomes. None of them reported working as brokers or receivers on a full time or permanent basis. These findings debunk the notion that the smuggling system operates like a tight criminal network which operates outside government and is closed to anyone trying to enter it.

A socially and culturally embedded process

The cooperation of the local community in towns and villages along the way is critical because their help is needed in changing the location of safe houses to evade detection. Smugglers usually keep migrants in rural areas under the shelter of the trees with guards appointed from the community for several days before they cross borders. Once a sufficient number of potential migrants have been gathered at the safe house for onward transportation, agents of the lead smuggler organize the practicalities of the journey. The journey is usually led by facilitators from Afar called menged merti (guides) who are engaged because of their deep knowledge of the local topography of the lowland region. They have an understanding of the routes and are able to circumvent migration control agencies. There was no indication of external money being supplied to these actors and they were employed for their indigenous knowledge. An extract from an interview with a smuggler in Kombolcha illustrates the nature of the relationship between smugglers and local recruiters and receivers:

My task was communicating with the lead smuggler who is based in Saudi Arabia. Based on consultation with him I collect aspiring migrants in Kombolcha and transfer them to our partner in Afar. I sit in Kombolcha town. We had collectors ... in villages and they send them to me in Kombolcha. I arrange accommodation and food in Kombolcha and arrange transport from Kombolcha to Wuha Limat or until Desheto. From there, an Afar smuggler, with the approval of a clan leader who assigns a guide to help migrants to circumvent checkpoints in towns such as Wuha Limat, Millie, Logiya and Desheto in Afar Regional state and also border controls at the Djibouti border. From Djibouti side, brokers who belong to Djiboutian Afar, mostly nomadic pastoralists collect the migrants, arrange boats and help them to cross the Red Sea and enter Yemen.

Crucially, this extract shows the social embeddedness of the process based on the local context and local knowledge as opposed to organised crime. In the lowland nomadic pastoral societies in the Horn of Africa such as Afar and Somali clan heads are crucial for building trust and for the success of any operation that crosses their territory. Clans heads usually mediate the relationship between the society and an outsider, and it is therefore surprising to

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read in agency reports on smuggling that the involvement of local tribes and clans is interpreted as criminal activity. Borders drawn by European colonizers in Africa arbitrarily separated ethnic groups, languages and cultures. The Afar in the Horn of Africa, who inhabit Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea have been politically divided by such borders but their shared history and cultural affinities have enabled facilitation.

Smugglers mentioned that they take the help of the local Afar or Menedmeri especially when migrants are asked to cross the border into Djibouti on foot to stay off the main roads that are patrolled. Menedmeri are involved in cross border pastoralism and the trade of contraband across the border. They have an intimate knowledge of the landscape and crossing points which makes them indispensable in smuggling. Migrant smuggling rather converges with the localized borderland economy, which in the context of the Horn of Africa depends on the existence of cross border community and mobilities. Borderland communities cross the border with their livestock and goods, which is the base of their livelihood, by making use of their cross-border kin-based networks. Migrant smugglers build their activities on this borderland economy in terms of knowledge, information and actors involved. For the borderland community members involvement in smuggling is just part of an opportunistic livelihood activity rather than, engagement in planned external big crimes. In other words, it is part of small-scale informal trades which are mainly meant for survival rather than big illicit business. For instance, a young shepherd may help a group of migrants to cross the Ethiopia-Djibouti border by circumventing the law enforcement for a small charge of 200 Birr (6 USD). These shepherds avoid places where the law enforcement bodies are temporarily stationed. The same shepherd may give information to a goods smuggler taking his cargo on the back of a camel. Thus, the involvement of small local level smugglers at borders with the local contraband trade did not indicate that human smugglers were in a stable relationship of collaboration with serious crime or that they were being controlled by kingpins who managed various criminal activities from above. Similarly, a few interviewees mentioned highly localised criminal activity across the border with Saudi Arabia such as bootlegging.

Income and profits

As discussed above, one of the major concerns in the criminalisation discourse is the profits from human smuggling and how these are connected to money laundering. Our research shows that commissions for smuggling related tasks such as recruiting, feeding, advising, transporting and housing are quite modest and ranged from 100 to 600 Birr per migrant. These tasks are performed by the brokers, receivers, cooks, renters of safe houses, transporters and guides who all belonged to the local community. One migrant known as Saif described how he paid several intermediaries to reach Djibouti from the town of Galafi on the way:

There were Afar people who were engaged in smuggling in Galafi and I found one smuggler who could help me to pass the border for 200 Birr. There were other brokers near the Ethiopian border on the side of Djibouti who used to take migrants by vehicle to Djibouti City. The guy whom I paid 200 Birr in Afar, helped me to meet the smugglers in Djibouti. They asked me to pay 1000 Birr and I agreed.

Payments to law enforcements agencies such as the police at the checkpoints and the border guards are comparable. These costs are borne by the migrant but compared to the southern and the western routes, the price of the Ethiopia-Djibouti-Yemen route is much lower, and most of those aspiring to migrate to the Gulf are from poor families. Until 2015 when
restrictions on migration facilitation were introduced, a migrant would not pay more than 300 USD for the entire journey across land and sea from Wollo to Saudi Arabia. With the intensification of migration controls the price has increased to 700 USD. The intensification of controls has necessitated the involvement of additional actors such as personnel from law enforcement agencies and others to the field of smuggling facilitation.\textsuperscript{50} The pattern of rising costs in Ethiopia reflects that these are being driven by increased barriers to mobility and the growing number of officials who have to be paid off.

There was no indication whatsoever that rising costs of migration were linked to the illicit profiteering of smuggling kingpins who are involved in money laundering. Many of the actors use the income from migration facilitation to support themselves and their families in an otherwise very resource scarce environment. Only a handful of the lead smugglers have made profits large enough to invest in family property and businesses such as new buildings and transport enterprises. Other smugglers already have retail businesses, hotels and bars, which they operate in parallel and top up their earnings with the extra income from smuggling.

Distributing the profits of smuggling in the broader community ensured that the business was socially accepted and not regarded as illicit regardless of its legal status. In Wollo, people do not refer to illegal versus legal migration and instead say “sea way” versus “passport.” The local differentiation shows that the boundary between the illegal and legal is blurred. We observed that many of those who obtained passports in preparation to use legal channels changed their itinerary to the sea way when the government bureaucracy delayed their plan. Migrants and their families do not differentiate between formal and informal facilitators as legal and criminal but are rather concerned about getting the service regardless of the legality or lack of. Local facilitators, unlike official agents, share their profits with many local actors and provide a livelihood to others in the community such as shops, bars and street coffee sellers. Although smugglers collect a relatively small amount of money from migrants, they reach a number of people and rural families at places of origin and around borders. Similar observations were made by Alpes in her research in Cameroun\textsuperscript{51} wherein she noted how communities differentiated between illicit and licit activities and how this differed from the categorisations of legal and illegal by the state. Due to the wider benefits of the smuggling business in the communities in migrants’ places of origin and transit brokers and smugglers have come to occupy positions of respect.

As one police officer we interviewed in Kombolcha town said, “brokers have become like government,” commanding the same social and economic power locally. A shop owner in Ataye town said, their business is vibrant when migration is active. It is evident from such statements that government drives to flush smugglers out would have limited success. From the local communities’ point of view, migration facilitation does not drain local resources. The acceptance smugglers win within the community helps them to survive and operate in a difficult environment at a time when governments, supported by regional and international stakeholders, are openly campaigning to eliminate them.

Smugglers’ self-image is of being facilitators and the enablers of dreams. They also take pride in their contributions to the community. Umar is a smuggler we interviewed in Dessie town. Speaking about his positive contribution in the face of state criminalization, Umar stated, “... all the good things you see such as cafés, Bajaj (imported autorickshaws), vehicles, corrugated iron houses you can see in small towns and villages are the result of migration which is facilitated by us. ... I cannot see where we committed a crime.” Given the reality of unemployment, landlessness and lack of other opportunities, the brokers

\textsuperscript{50} Fekadu et al. (2019).

\textsuperscript{51} Alpes (2013).
representation of themselves as useful actors is more appealing to people than the state’s characterisation and legal paradigm.\textsuperscript{52} As a result, the horrendous images of the situation in Yemen in media reports, and stories of suffering from deportees never stop migrants using their services. According to our informants, aspiring migrants know that migration through Yemen involves abuses, especially when they have insufficient amount of money to pay for the service of smuggling.

\textit{Money flows}

Migrants pay brokers in Ethiopian Birr as the brokers and smugglers along the Wollo – Saudi Arabia route are mostly Ethiopian nationals. As mentioned above, they invest the income from smuggling locally in residential buildings locally or places like Dubai Sefer. In addition, smugglers also may not require any payment before departure. Migrants are asked to pay smugglers when they arrive in Yemen by contacting their families or relatives in Saudi Arabia. Smugglers have agents in Yemen who collect migrants from the seaside on the Yemen border; they detain migrants until money transfer is secured from migrant families back in Wollo or in the Middle East. Feleke describes his experience “I phoned my aunt and she gave 2000 riyal for the delala’s families close to her. The delala has his own people in Saudi that collect the money... The payment is made in cash for a nearby person not transferred through banks. It costs me a total of 24,000 Birr from Ethiopia to get into Saudi Arabia and more than 50% is covered by my aunt who resides in Saudi.” It is common knowledge in the villages of Wollo that having access to informal channels for sending money is critical for avoiding beatings by the Meshiwar. As one migrant said, “\textit{If you have Anshi\textsuperscript{53} or money, you will not suffer. The Meshiwar always say ‘Birr kale dula yele’ meaning ‘If there is money there is no stick.’}” Those who travelled without access to funds from their relatives or without the protection of a delala against theft in the desert, ran this risk. It also appears from the interviews that several unscrupulous actors have entered the business of smuggling since surveillance was intensified and well known and trusted smugglers were imprisoned. Again, policy appears to have had unintended consequences.

The flow of money outside the formal banking system has been regarded as an indicator of criminal activity and money laundering\textsuperscript{54} but our interviews suggest that the main reason for paying money to brokers in this way was to leave no formal trace of payments to smugglers. As Yasin a 28-year-old returnee female domestic worker says “\textit{In the past migrants would send 5000 Birr through banks for brokers but now that does not work. This is because the bank receipt may be used as evidence by law enforcement bodies ... So that now no broker accepts that way and payment is made in Saudi by Riyal from the migrants’ relative through hawala and in cash.”}

It should also be noted that the migration of women and girls is almost always through a system of debt-migration. As in many other parts of the world, the female migration for domestic work was organised under a system of debt bondage where the upfront costs for travel, placement and visas (in regular migration cases) were paid by the brokers and then recovered from the workers’ wages. Dessiye and Emerie\textsuperscript{55} recorded in their study of migration from North Wollo to the Gulf that returnees from Saudi Arabia owed 10,000 Birr each (1000 USD in 2010) with five percent interest to the brokers. Similar levels

\textsuperscript{52} Alpes (2013).
\textsuperscript{53} Someone who can settle the payment.
\textsuperscript{54} Research Evidence Facility (2019).
of debt were observed in our study. While the system of debt bondage has been rightly maligned for trapping workers in exploitative working conditions and causing extreme distress and few options for escape it is also an important means of being able to migrate for poor families who cannot pay for international flights and other costs.

Smugglers as protectors

The migration control regime has not only contributed to the increase in the cost of smuggling but has tremendously increased the logistical, social and economic importance of brokers/smugglers because without them, the risk of failure would be high and migration would not be possible, and dreams cannot be realised. In the past, migrants could succeed in clandestine journeys without the support of the smugglers. Now, the law enforcements are placed at key transit nodes making the journeys harder and harder. This did little to deter migrants but rather made the expertise of the smugglers indispensable. Interviews in the field indicated that a majority of passages with the assistance of smugglers were successful and did not involve violence and extortion. Smugglers are perceived by aspiring migrants as people who offer a service and protection in foreign territories where the risk of extortion, arrest and deportation is ever-present. According to the migrants and smugglers that we interviewed, law enforcement agents are almost everywhere, looking for bribes and threatening arrest. However only those who have established relations of trust with the law enforcement agencies are able to bribe them. Another huge risk for migrants is the extreme heat and lack of water and accommodation along the route. Migrants would easily perish without the help of smugglers who ensure that they survive in such hostile environments. Although Ethiopians have the right to cross into Djibouti without visas and passports, surveillance officers identify migrants based on their appearance. If they are not under the protection of a smuggler they are detained and sent back to Ethiopia. Kemal’s, a deportee from Saudi Arabia, attempted to make at least part of the journey without smugglers to save some money is a good example of the risks that migrants travelling on their own are exposed to.

First, I tried once to pass through Dessie–Bati-Logia route but I did not succeed. I used a heavy truck which was going to Djibouti and I paid 500 Birr for that; however, I was caught by the Federal Police at Samara. Our plan was to travel up to Djibouti, then to the Red Sea coast by the same track. Actually, we got a contact number of a smuggler named Mohamed through one of our friends who has a friend in Saudi Arabia. But, we wanted to call him on our arrival in Djibouti so that we could save some money. Unfortunately, we were caught and spent a week in a detention centre and were deported back. I think we might not have been caught by the police had we called the smuggler as he could have helped us to pass the check point.

Even experienced migrants who have travelled that route several times have to use the services of smugglers. Birru was one such migrant who had travelled to Saudi Arabia a couple of times before, but he regarded the assistance of the meshiwar (Yemeni smugglers who have a bad name for kidnapping migrants and demanding ransom). Birru narrated why he sought their help.

After staying for two days in the forest near the Saudi border, we decided to engage a Meshiwar. This was because we would be deported if we were caught by the police. Since all the borders are closed by the police we did not know how to cross the border and finding someone who could help us was mandatory. That is why we contacted the Meshiwar. After getting the Meshiwar, I gave them my sister’s number. They called
her and she sent them 2,500 Saudi Riyal. The Meshiwar are experienced regarding the time the border is open and the part of the border with strict control and weak control. What they expect from us is paying them money.

The interview extract reveals three important aspects of the smuggling process. First, even experienced migrants cannot make clandestine migration journeys without smuggles. Second, migrants prefer the meshiwar, a group that has a very bad image among the border police. For the migrants, the meshiwar are not criminals to run away from. Third, the flow of money is not to organized criminal syndicates but rather to members of border communities who are socially and economically marginalised and who are eking out an existence in harsh climates.

Conclusion

Irregular migration from Wollo to Saudi Arabia with the help of smuggling facilitators has gathered momentum for a variety of reasons including bans on certain kinds of migration, age restrictions, the unavailability of legal migration options for low skilled workers as well as the ease and efficiency of informal brokers and smugglers compared to the official system. Migration is perceived as one of the only viable options for improving the living standards of the family but also meeting personal goals, especially for women escaping patriarchal restrictions and stigma after divorce. Our research shows how the facilitation of smuggling has emerged in this particular context of surveillance and enforcement in Ethiopia. Although the facilitation of irregular migration emerged in the context of the nation states, these patterns of mobility rely on forms of identification and cultural affinities that do not adhere neatly to the homogenising narratives of nation-state that map culture and identity onto place and people.

The empirical accounts illustrate the complexity of the facilitators’ behaviour as they are helping migrants achieve their aspirations but at the same time making a small profit in the process. However, the state takes a unidimensional view of smuggling and bolstered by international pressure, has criminalised the activities of smugglers. Smugglers are accused of being involved with multiple nefarious activities across the Horn of Africa including the drugs trade, money laundering and illegal movement of people but this is not borne out by our findings. Linking human smuggling to transnational crime and posing it as a threat to national peace and security has provided the justification for outlawing the activities of smuggling facilitators.

The accounts of migrants and other actors involved in human smuggling from Wollo to Saudi Arabia challenge these representations by showing that migration facilitation is localised, built on kinship networks, embedded in local economies and cultures and organised by a variety of ordinary people who enter the business opportunistically. The research shows that contrary to the notion that smuggling networks operate in a closed system, almost anyone with an understanding of the outside world and communication skills can become an askoblay (local recruiter or broker) or teqebay (receiver who holds migrants in safe houses along the way), supplying migrants to lead smugglers or delala. The earnings from these activities are relatively small and supplement their otherwise meagre incomes. The delala, who may derive larger profits, share these with the local community to maintain their position and consolidate their reputation as protectors and benefactors of the community. The structure of the smuggling industry has changed in response to tighter regulation and surveillance. As older more established lead brokers have been arrested, the remaining ones have either gone underground or shifted their bases to other countries.

There was no indication that smugglers had diversified into other illegal activities. While other highly localised illegal activities did take place in the same geographies
especially across the border with Djibouti and Saudi Arabia such as smuggling of contraband and bootlegging, smugglers co-exist with these businesses rather than becoming entangled with their activities. If they did cross over at all, this was through taking the services of local shepherds who have a deep knowledge of the local topography and may assist both human smugglers and others kinds of smugglers to cross the border at particular points. The remuneration paid was very small and irregular. In sum, the overall workings of human smuggling from Wollo to Saudi Arabia were nothing like the crime syndicates that are being constructed in the popular imagination by external agencies and the state.

It is hoped that these findings will inform policy in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa away from the current hysteria towards making efforts to increase legal opportunities for migration in discussion with destination countries.