

# Forced migratory flows in Eastern Africa

A preliminary analysis of refugees' reception in Ethiopia

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**Abstract:** In 1996, Gaim Kibreab<sup>3</sup> referred to the African refugees as what the eyes refuse to see. Looking at the huge population shift from rural areas to the Eastern African cities, Kibreab observed that this population displacement was taking place in the absence of any structural transformation in the economies concerned. At that time African host-governments saw the situation in their urban centers being exacerbated by the presence of refugees who were said to compete with nationals for limited employment opportunities and social services. Less than twenty years later the situation is far from improved. Today, in the general context of the mixed migratory flows originating and transiting through the East Africa and the Horn of Africa<sup>4</sup> region, refugee flows continue to represent a serious concern, with countries in the region simultaneously hosting and assisting internally displaced persons, refugees, returnees and labour migrants.

**Keywords:** migrations, Eastern Africa, Horn of Africa, refugees.

## *Forced migratory flows in Eastern Africa*

As of March 2013, there were over 9 million refugees and internally displaced persons in East Africa and the Horn of Africa.<sup>5</sup> The region had the largest increase of refugees globally in 2012. Armed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and South Sudan forced people to leave their homes and seek protection in neighboring countries leading to an increase in the refugee population in Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan and Uganda.<sup>6</sup> In rela-

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3. KIBREAB 1996, pp. 131-178.

4. The Horn and East Africa Region consists of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.

5. IOM data, available at <http://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/where-we-work/africa-and-the-middle-east/east-africa.html>.

6. UN OCHA, "Eastern Africa displaced populations report" (Issue 14, 30 September 2012–31 March 2013). Available at <http://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/eastern-africa-displaced-popula->

tion to the size of their economies, Kenya and Ethiopia are respectively ranked as the second and third leading host countries in the world for refugees. Against this background, this article aims at analyze the main determinants of forced migratory flows in Eastern Africa, looking specifically at the case of refugees starting from Eastern African countries and hosted in the Ethiopian refugees camps. The final goal is to provide a description of the forced migratory flows spurred by political violence and military conflicts in the Ethiopian surrounding countries, analyzing how reception is granted to refugees escaping from war. Starting from the fact that societal and territorial consequences of forced migration are varied and multifaceted, this research wants to devote special attention to the emerging trends related to regime-change processes in the region looking in particular at the reception of South Sudanese refugees' in Ethiopia. This ongoing research, in particular, has the broad goal to examine these humanitarian flows looking in particular at the main determinants and implications of their insertion in the Ethiopian refugees camps. Starting from the fact that migrants flows in Ethiopia are consistently increased in the last years due to some specific problems that continue to affect the surrounding countries like environmental degradation, armed conflicts, and political, economic and food crises, this analysis will try to critically investigate the reception conditions guaranteed to the refugees seeking protection in Ethiopia, looking both at the multiplicity of factors driving such flows and the differentiated needs and profiles of the migrants hosted in the Ethiopian camps. Moving from a general assessment of the data collected during the desk research the paper concludes offering a discussion about the remaining gaps and possible future research directions.

### *The case of Ethiopia*

With an estimated population of 96,633,458 million in 2013<sup>7</sup>, Ethiopia is the most populous country in Eastern Africa and the second

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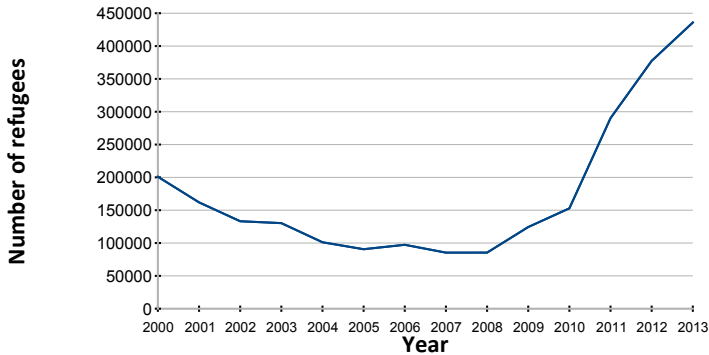
7. Cia, 2013, Worldfact Book, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-fact-book/geos/et.html>.

most inhabited country in sub-Saharan Africa after Nigeria. Ethiopia is divided into nine ethnically-based regional states and two chartered cities (see map). The 80% of its residents is located in the three biggest regional states: Oromia, Amhara and Southern Nations and Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) region. The lowest proportion of the population is in Harari regional state. While, according to the World Bank, the country is experiencing a remarkable drop in the national poverty rate (from 60.5% in 2005 to 30.7% in 2011), it remains a poor country, ranking 92<sup>th</sup> out of 95 developing countries of the Human Poverty Index (HPI). According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), close to 10% of the population in Ethiopia is chronically vulnerable to food insecurity and dependent on national safety-net programmes with millions of people require emergency assistance annually. This makes the country the biggest beneficiary of development aid in Africa, receiving approximately US \$ 3.5 billion in long-term development assistance each year.<sup>8</sup>

Like most Eastern African countries, Ethiopia is both a sending and receiving country of migration. Internal migration is mainly marked by refugee movements, mostly from Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea. Those refugee flows are for the most part the result of political and civil conflict and persistent environmental disasters in the neighboring countries. This has been observed particularly due to the wars in the Horn of Africa involving Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and southern Sudan. In 2013, according to UNHCR, the country hosted 435,867 refugees: the largest groups were Somalis (55,47%), Sudanese (7,78%), South Sudanese (16,41%) and Eritreans (19,36%). The past two years have seen the refugee population in Ethiopia more than double, with 435,867 refugees compared with 290,212 in 2011 (see Fig. 1). This has been due to the influx of more than 100,000 Somalis into the Dollo Ado region and a flow of Sudanese entering the country in the region around Assosa. A stable, but significant, number of Eritreans have also entered Ethiopia's Afar and Tigray regions. In addition, there are a number of displaced people from Kenya in the Moyale region. The attractiveness of Ethiopia

8. Based on the international standard of US\$1.25 a day, purchasing-power-parity adjusted (World Bank's World Development Indicators, August 2013).

for those kind of flows is mainly due to the Ethiopian geopolitical position and the open-door-policy granted to foreign asylum seekers by the Ethiopian government. With over 5.328 km of lands' border, Ethiopia is constantly exposed to incoming migratory flows, mainly from the sur-



*Fig. 1. Total Refugees Camps Population (2000-2013). Source: authors' processing on data collected from UNHCR*

rounding countries. Of the five countries neighboring Ethiopia, Somalia shares the longest borderline, 1,600 km. With a frontier length of 883 km, South Sudan comes second, while Sudan, with its 723 km comes third. Ethiopia's margins with Kenya cover a distance of 861 km and 912 km with Eritrea. Djibouti has the shortest borderline with Ethiopia, which is 349 km. Despite much of Ethiopia's border areas are patrolled by the military forces, particularly at the border with Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan, border migratory pressure remains high also due to the topography which make border control particularly difficult, and due to the border conflicts and violence among trans-boundary pastoralist groups. Besides the geopolitical importance of Eastern African forced migrations issues, research on them has been hindered by a scarcity of satisfactory data. To date, there have been few systematic attempts to estimate the volume, directions and contents of forced migration flows in the eastern African region, even though studies related to some parts of it, as in the case of the Horn of Africa, point to a rise in forced migration linked to the political violence's escalation. The scarcity of scholarly efforts in this field are largely determined by access restrains and lack of statistical data. Consequently, very little is known about the determinants of refugees' evacuation from violence-torn areas, and

most research deals with refugees' lives in receiving countries or their repatriation after violence in countries of origin. Moreover, assessments on refugees' reception in Eastern Africa are nearly dominated by international agencies working with refugees and IDPs, such as the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees and IOM. Thus the main data and analysis on this topic are represented by reports and briefs issued by these agencies.

### *A snapshot on refugees' camps in Ethiopia*

Regime changes, political instability, ethnic tensions and proxy civil wars have been pervasive features of the eastern African region since today. As predictable, these dynamics have impacted on Ethiopia generating huge internal forced population movements. Currently, the management of refugees' flows in Ethiopia is mainly handled by UNHCR that is the main organization in charge of the coordination of assistance in the various camps. The Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), an institution established by the Ethiopian government and part of the Ministry of Home Affairs, is the main implementing partner of UNHCR. ARRA is in charge of food distribution, security issues in the camps, and other programs on health, education, etc. Due to the scarcity of available data concerning the refugees' reception in the Ethiopian camps, this analysis uses only statistical data collected from UNHCR Population Statistics Database.<sup>9</sup>

In particular, the following analysis focuses on the data related to the "Total Refugees Camps Population" by year and by origin country (2000-2013). A strict focus has been dedicated to the analysis of the flows coming from neighboring countries like Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan. As concerns the case of South Sudan, a cautionary point is due as the data referred to South Sudan are reported in the graph together with the data related to Sudan.<sup>10</sup> As concerns the number and location of camps reported by UNHCR, they are mainly concentrated in

9. UNHCR Population Statistics: See <http://popstats.unhcr.org/>.

10. Data on South Sudan are aggregated to Sudan's data because, South Sudan became an independent state only in 2011.

the following urban areas: Addis Ababa, Alamata, Assosa, Dollo Ado, Gambella, Shire, Ken-Borena. For obvious reasons these camps are located in the gate-keeper areas on the Ethiopian borders with Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya (see Fig.2).

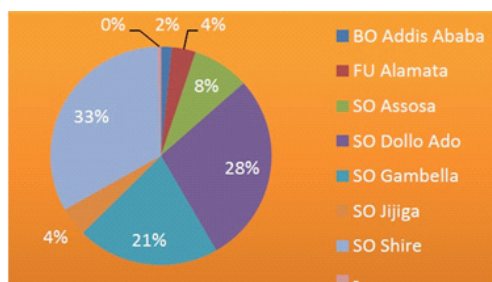


Fig. 2. Figure Camp Population by Urban Areas. Source: UNHCR, February 2014. Ethiopian Operational Overview

The analysis of the refugees by sending countries shows that the most part of refugees came from Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan. As concerns Somalia, from 2000 to 2004 the flow decreased from 12,096 to 1,647. This trend started to change in 2005 when the presence of Somalis people increased to 15,901, arriving in 2013 at 241,776. As previously highlighted, this sharp increasing reflects the regime change process experienced by the country in the last decade. The upsurge of insurgency in Somalia, where Ethiopia has been military engaged since 2006, has in fact led to new refugee flows into Ogaden. The Ethiopian army has also been involved in a counter-insurgency operation in Ogaden since June 2007. A similar trend is observable in the amount of Eritrean refugees that has increased from 107 refugees in 2005, to 13,079 in 2006 and 84,386 in 2013. Eritreans are usually recognised as refugees on prima facie basis and UNHCR has issued a non-return advisory.<sup>11</sup> The refugees mainly come from communities living on both sides of the border, such as Tigray-Tigrinya, Kunama and Afar, all claim persecution and harassment by the Eritrean government. Restrictions in education in Eritrea have also developed into a major push factor, as

11. See ICMP, 2008, *East Africa Migration Route Initiative Gaps & Needs Analysis Project Country Reports: Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya*, p. 31.

universities in 2005 were turned into military camps. Although Eritrean refugees generally fit the common denominator of the African refugee being young and male, single women also flee to avoid mandatory conscription.<sup>12</sup>

An additional trend that confirms the strict correlation between regime change processes and forced population movements is showed by Sudan's case, especially as concerns the increase in asylum seekers flows followed to the independence of South Sudan in 2011. While this trend is not evident in the timeframe of the below reported graph, it is interesting to note that as of May 2014, according to IOM data<sup>13</sup>, 387,131 South Sudanese asylum seekers have fled to neighboring countries since conflict broke out in mid December 2013. According to UNHCR Ethiopia has taken the largest number of these refugees (more than 147,040 registered since the December's outbreak), most of those arrived in Gambella region through the Pagak, Akobo Tergol and Burubiey border entry points. According to an UNHCR estimate, that number could reach 350,000 by the end of the year. The vast majority of this flow is represented by family groups, who are extremely weak when they reach Ethiopia, having traveled several days or weeks, on foot or by boat. Usually they enter the country through different entry points into Ethiopia, like Tergol, Pagak or Burubiey. According to many NGOs active in the transit camps located on the border regions, the population at the Burubiey transit camp has exceeded its capacity. Approximately 13,000 people are housed there, under extremely precarious conditions, while awaiting transfer to other camps. However, transfer to the region's two main refugee camps does not guarantee healthy living conditions: despite the efforts of international authorities, these camps, which are often located in flood prone zones, lack adequate shelter and sufficient water (for instance, the Burubiey center guarantees only seven liters per day per person), and latrines (one latrine per 60 people at Lietchuor and one latrine per 288 people at Kule 1 camp). These conditions are among

12. East Africa Migration Route Initiative: [http://igad.int/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_download&gid=16&Itemid=144](http://igad.int/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=16&Itemid=144).

13. South Sudan: See <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IOM-Situation-Report-South-Sudan-Emergency-in-Ethiopia-24-June-2014.pdf>.

the primary vectors of morbidity and mortality in the camps. According to the reports from MSF all the Ethiopian camps are insalubrious: MSF operators observed the extent of refugees malnutrition even in Burubiey camp. In that case, nearly one child out of four was suffering from malnutrition and the rate of severe acute malnutrition was above 7%. After several weeks in the camps, where living conditions are very unsafe, they do not get any better. Although malnutrition rates declined, they remained above emergency thresholds. According to the data released from hospital and health center in Lietchuor camp, and in the Itang hospital, 10 kilometers from Kule camp, diarrhea and pneumonia are the primary illnesses associated with malnutrition. As a result, mortality rates have been above emergency thresholds. In May 2014, mortality rates ranged between 7% and 18% at the two MSF centers in Lietchuor and Itang, where children are hospitalized and receive intensive nutritional treatment. With the start of the rainy season, sanitary conditions could worsen and new illnesses, such as malaria could appear.

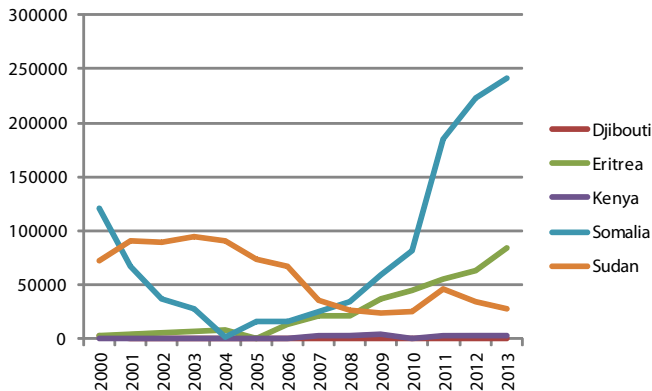
*Provisional conclusions and further research needed*

As above described, lack of data and, consequently, lack of knowledge of the character, patterns and problems of forced migration flows are critical issues that weaken the effective understanding of refugees dynamics in Ethiopia. As showed above, the refugee flows in the country are mainly the result of political and civil conflict in the neighboring countries. In 2013, about 435,867 refugees from several African countries were present. However, refugees from Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Eritrea make up the majority.

Looking at the continuous increase of refugees flows in the country is more than evident that Ethiopia needs to increase its assistance capacities for refugees. More in detail, an in depth understanding of prolonged refugee situations without prospective of integration or return in the sending country is still needed, considered that the country suffers of the serious lack of adequate social services dedicated to family groups that spend most part of their lives in the camps. According to UNCHR Population Statistics Database, in fact, in 2013 the 35% of refugees are people aged between 18 to 59 years while the rest are mostly children from 5 to 11 years old (26%) and from 0 to 4 (15%). It



is also evident that a Government recognition of conflict-induced refugees flows would guarantee the protection of all refugees populations and their successful integration into the overall national responses to ongoing and future conflicts. Again, a serious concern is represented



*Immigrants distribution by country of origin. Source: authors' processing on data collected from UNHC*

by the absence of reliable data on refugee flows impacting on the country. Numbers and statistics are not readily comprehensively due to differences in coverage, definitions of variables used and time-frame of collected data. This is largely because international institutions active on the field, collect and process specific data and information just in accordance with their specific needs. Also at the governmental level, Ethiopia suffers from lack of harmonization of definitions of variables of forced migration statistics especially as concerns the refugees determined by civil unrest in the surrounding countries. The absence of collection and processing of migration data together with the lack of a national refugees database are also additional sources of knowledge gaps. This general picture calls for major expertise with regard to prevention, responses and solutions and better coordination of humanitarian responses between international and local actors. Humanitarian action in the region must take into account the increasing complexity of humanitarian crises in bordering countries. Refugees receptions in the Ethiopian camps calls also for new mandate and additional responsibilities of organizations concerned with forced migration. As showed by the ongoing South-Sudanese refugees flow, people movements have an impact on political stability, national security and economic devel-

opment not only at the national level but also in regional terms. More important, as demonstrated by the flows of refugees from Eritrea, the categories of forced migrants are not mutually exclusive and often they are overlapping, as truly observed by Martin who states: «Forced migrants may belong to more than one group, either at the same time or in close sequence. For example, refugees returning to their countries may become internally displaced persons if conflict continues or if they cannot return to their homes for other reasons. If environmental damage, including mine fields, prevents their reintegration, they may be environmental migrants/refugees as well».<sup>14</sup>

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