Country study

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Ethiopia country profile

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About this publication

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in Ethiopia, recent trends in migration, refugee and asylum patterns, public perceptions and political narratives. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation aimed at engaging public and private investors interested in migration and displacement.

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Acronyms

ARRA	Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs
AU	African Union
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
DRDIP	Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OCP	Out of Camp Policy
QEP	Qualification and Employment Perspectives
SHARPE	Strengthening Host and Refugee Populations in Ethiopia
SNNP	Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's region
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Executive summary

Current trends, history and policy context

Ethiopia hosted an estimated 1.1 million refugees and other migrants in 2020, representing 0.9% of the overall population. Refugees and asylum-seekers made up over two-thirds of all foreign nationals registered in the country. Currently, the number of refugees in Ethiopia stands at over 795,000, the third largest refugee population in Africa.

Ethiopia has a long history of mobility, spanning movements into, from and within the country. This has included refugee movements, alongside individuals – many from the same countries of origin – seeking education, employment or to join family in Ethiopia, or moving as part of pastoralist traditions. Such mobility should be understood in the context of Ethiopia's history of state formation, with many of the country's border regions absorbed into the Ethiopian state within recent centuries. These regions therefore maintain historical and cultural ties to territories now outside Ethiopia and long-standing traditions of mobility across contemporary boundaries.

The country's first major refugee inflows in recent history were seen in Gambella in the early 1960s, with the 1980s heralding the arrival of much larger refugee populations (from Sudan and Somalia). While refugee numbers declined throughout the next two decades, they increased sharply again in the 2000s as a result of worsening instability and famine in Somalia and South Sudan, alongside new arrivals from Eritrea.

Since 2012, Ethiopia has also seen increasing internal political instability and conflict, and high levels of internal displacement. Key areas of tension have included disputes over the balance of power as part of Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system and contested notions of national identity. These tensions have increased since November 2020 as part of an unpredictable and fast-escalating conflict in Tigray, which has had significant impacts both for local communities and Eritrean refugees in the region.

Since the 1980s, Ethiopia's dominant approach to refugee hosting has been one of encampment and care and maintenance, with limited formal opportunities for most refugees to work. However, recent years have seen commitments to move away from this model, including by expanding the Out of Camp Policy (OCP) (previously restricted to Eritreans) and reforms to refugees' right to work. Since 2016 Ethiopia has been at the forefront of regional and global policy developments supporting refugees' inclusion and self-reliance, co-hosting key international summits, announcing numerous pledges and, in 2017, becoming a pilot country for the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). In 2019 the government passed a new Refugee Proclamation, expanding refugees' rights in relation to freedom of movement, rights to work and access to education and other key services.

However, despite some progress, significant work remains to translate recent commitments and legislation into meaningful changes in practice at local levels. Recent political turmoil in the country and the ongoing conflict in Tigray have also slowed momentum around the implementation of promised reforms, as political attention has turned to internal instability and deteriorating economic conditions, and the Covid-19 pandemic has had a similar impact on momentum.

Public and political narratives

Multiple, overlapping narratives concerning refugees and other migrants were identified in the research conducted for this study. Issues surrounding refugees – as well as other migrants – have greatest prominence in local discourse within refugee-hosting areas. Overall it is difficult to generalise, with distinct dynamics emerging with regard to different groups of refugees, as well as between regions, local communities and even individuals. While narratives have remained relatively consistent over time, more significant shifts were noted in the past year, particularly in narratives surrounding Eritreans.

Narratives around refugees and other migrants intersect with complex conceptions of national identity, which have become increasingly sensitive in recent years. The complex historical legacy in Ethiopia's border regions means that distinctions based on ethnic and territorial identity – in particular, between Ethiopia's 'highland' core and 'lowland' peripheries – are often felt to be more salient than those between refugees and their hosts, who in many cases share historical ties. These dynamics play out differently in different parts of the country.

In terms of national-level narratives, proactive public engagement by Ethiopia's federal government tends to be sporadic, and refugee issues are infrequently covered by national media outlets. However, as seen during the passage of the Refugee Proclamation through parliament, there is potential to cut through to national debate, particularly when these issues are connected to broader concerns and mobilised by influential actors. In contrast to its quieter domestic stance, the government has positioned itself internationally as a welcoming host to refugees and a key player in emerging approaches centred on refugees' inclusion. Ethiopia has received enthusiastic international praise for its recent reforms, alongside significant financial and technical resources for the refugee response.

Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Like other countries in sub-Saharan and East Africa, polling data on attitudes towards refugees and other migrants in Ethiopia is limited compared to high-income countries. Surveys tend to focus on attitudes towards 'immigrants' or 'foreign workers' in a broad sense, and do not specifically solicit attitudes towards refugees. While representing a key limitation, this data nonetheless presents various broader relevant insights:

- **Immigration and refugee-hosting do not appear to be salient issues for the Ethiopian public at the national level.** Instead, polling suggests that respondents prioritise issues such as water supply, infrastructure and electricity provision, crime and security (although relevant polling was carried out prior to the conflict in Tigray).
- Ethiopians demonstrate **relatively high levels of tolerance** towards immigrants, but also **significant support for restrictive policy measures.**
- **Ethiopians are split on whether immigration has had positive or negative impacts on the country's development**, with particularly high levels of concern about the impact of immigration on employment, as well as significant concerns around crime, terrorism and social conflict.
- **Views on immigration vary between demographic groups and across different parts of the country.** Older Ethiopians and those with lower levels of education appear most positive. Perceptions of immigration are markedly positive in Somali region, compared to Oromia and Amhara.

This data can be supplemented with evidence from more geographically specific studies in refugee-hosting areas, which points to often positive social dynamics. Sporadic tensions are nevertheless noted across all refugee-hosting regions, often linked to access to natural resources, in particular land and firewood, and intersecting with broader ethnic discrimination and conflict. However, tensions between communities have proved particularly severe only in Gambella.

Various studies have documented how, across many regions, shared cultural and ethnic ties between refugees and hosts have helped to foster positive relationships, as well as social and economic interactions. Efforts to support cohesion have often sought to build on connections between communities, creating more opportunities for refugees and local populations to come into contact.

Recommendations

Actors seeking to engage with narratives and attitudes towards migrants, including refugees, in Ethiopia can do so in several ways, including:

1. **Investing in in-depth research exploring attitudes towards refugees.** In particular, focusing on mixed methods approaches, and prioritising nationally representative polling, regionally specific studies and consistent research over time.
2. **Addressing negative attitudes and tensions, drawing on existing evidence and good practice.** For example, ensuring that initiatives are adapted to local contexts, prioritising humanitarian and development investments that address wider issues exacerbating negative perceptions, and undertaking projects aiming to strengthen social contact and promote social cohesion between refugees and hosts.
3. **Strengthening dialogue around Ethiopia's refugee response**, informed by a more substantive discussion of the place of refugees and other migrants within the country and in local communities, including from the perspective of those communities and refugees themselves. This should be connected to, and reflected within, future initiatives and dialogue addressing the ongoing conflict in the country.

1 Introduction

This study presents an overview of the historical evolution of Ethiopia's experience of hosting refugees and other migrants, current population trends and policy approaches, key features of public narratives surrounding refugees and other migrants, and existing evidence on public attitudes. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation, which aims to engage public and private investors interested in migration and displacement.

The study is based on a review of available literature and polling data, in particular seeking to identify:

- historical dynamics surrounding refugees and other migrants, key moments and policy approaches;
- current population dynamics, and policy approaches (including relevant policy and legislation, as well as its implementation);
- public and political narratives advanced by different actors (including central and local government, civil society, the media and the private sector) surrounding refugees and other migrants;
- evidence on public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants in Ethiopia.

Alongside academic and grey literature, key sources reviewed include UNHCR's Refugee Population Statistics Database, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)'s 2020 International Migrant Stock data, Afrobarometer Round 8 data (with data collected in Ethiopia in 2020), Waves 5 and 7 of the World Values Survey (with data collected in Ethiopia in 2007 and 2020), Gallup's Migrant Acceptance Index (based on 2016 Gallup World Poll Data) and Pew Global surveys (conducted in 2007 and 2015). The review of available literature and data was supplemented by 12 key informant interviews, spanning the Ethiopian government, national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations, refugee representatives, researchers, donors and private sector and media actors.

This study uses 'refugees and other migrants' in reference to the broad group of all foreign nationals in Ethiopia, whereas 'refugees' is used when referring only to this more circumscribed group (whether or not officially recognised as such). Given refugees' predominance in the Ethiopian context, this brief focuses more heavily on the latter. While the report focuses primarily on movements of refugees and other migrants *into* Ethiopia, to the extent possible this is situated within the context of broader mobility patterns, including internal displacement, emigration and outbound refugee movements. The terms 'immigrants' and 'immigration' are used where considered necessary to distinguish inbound migration movements (and policy frameworks surrounding them) from emigration patterns, or where this reflects the specific wording used in survey questions.

The term 'narratives' is used in reference to the different stories told about refugees and migrants by different actors in the public domain, which can be framed in diverse ways – and which may influence individual thoughts, feelings and attitudes, as well as legislation and policy approaches.

2 Ethiopia's history hosting refugees and other migrants

2.1 Refugee-hosting

Ethiopia has a long history of mobility, spanning movements into, from and within the country. These mobility patterns should be understood in the context of Ethiopia's broader history of state formation. Many of the country's border regions – including those hosting refugees – were absorbed into the Ethiopian state within recent centuries and maintain historical and cultural ties to territories now outside Ethiopia. As a result of this complex historical legacy in Ethiopia's border regions, distinctions based on ethnic and territorial identity – often framed in terms of a distinction between Ethiopia's 'highland' core and 'lowland' peripheries – are often more salient than those between refugees and other migrants and their hosts, who in many cases share historical ties (Carver, 2020; Vemeru et al., 2020).

Ethiopia's role as a host to individuals seeking asylum can be traced back to the early history of Islam, when followers of Muhammad fled to Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea) to escape persecution in the Arabian peninsula (Elmi, 2020). In the 20th century, Ethiopia's first major refugee inflows were seen in Gambella in the early 1960s, following the outbreak of the first Sudanese civil war. This period saw the establishment of Ethiopia's first refugee camp in Itang, although refugee numbers remained relatively low and many returned with the end of the conflict in Sudan in 1972 (see Figure 1) (Bayissa, 2010; Thomas, 2015; Carver et al., 2020b).

Much larger refugee populations arrived in the 1980s, as regional conflicts and instability drove increased refugee movements throughout the Horn of Africa (Fransen and Kuschminder, 2009). During these years, Ethiopia itself became a key source country for refugees (see Figure 1), as the period under the Derg regime – from 1974 to 1991 – saw the escalation of long-standing regional conflicts. Key episodes included the 1977–1978 Ogaden border war with Somalia, which led to the displacement of up to one million Ethiopian Somalis (Hammond, 2014; de Waal, 2015) and the escalation of Eritrea's independence struggle from 1974 onwards (Kibreab, 2009). The Derg period also saw the emergence of armed opposition within Ethiopia, in particular in Tigray and Oromia, driving displacement to Somalia, Djibouti and Sudan. This was compounded in 1984–1985 as drought and a devastating famine hit the country (Bariagaber, 1997; Hammond, 2014; de Waal, 2018).

In parallel to these refugee out-movements, Ethiopia saw its own refugee population grow substantially, rising from approximately 5,000 in 1982 to over 180,000 two years later, as civil war broke out once again in Sudan. By the end of the decade, refugee numbers in Ethiopia had reached almost 750,000, as Sudanese arrivals were joined by people fleeing an increasingly complex emergency in Somalia (Hammond, 2014) (see Figure 2).

Figure 1 Ethiopian refugees and refugees hosted in Ethiopia (1968–2020)
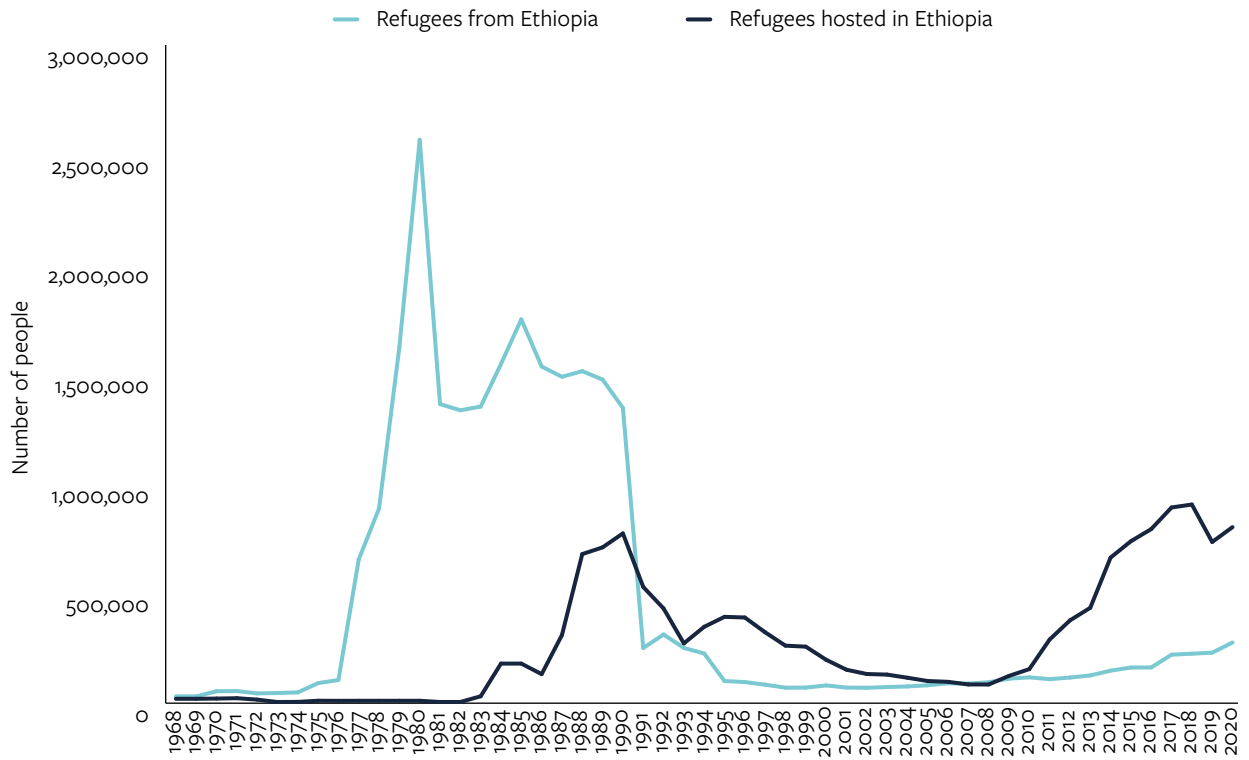
Note: Figures given here include both recognised refugees and asylum-seekers.

Source: UNHCR, 2021a

Figure 2 Refugees and asylum-seekers in Ethiopia by country of origin (1968–2020)
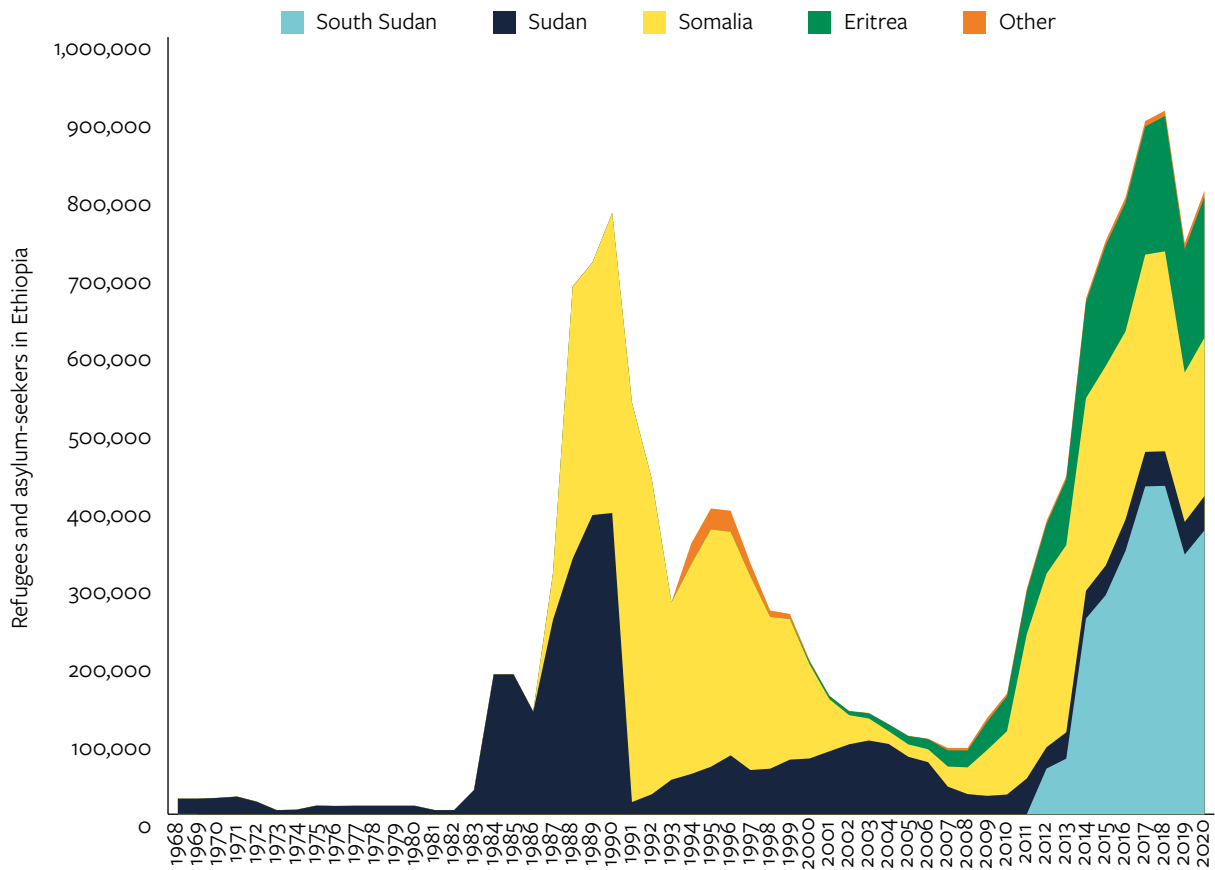
Note: Refugees categorised under 'other' include populations from Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti and Yemen, as well as smaller populations from elsewhere. The overall drop in refugee numbers from 2018–2019 can be attributed to a verification exercise which removed instances of double-counting. Figures for refugees from Sudan prior to South Sudan's independence in 2011 include those from present day South Sudan.
Source: UNHCR, 2021a

It was during the 1980s that Ethiopia's encampment approach first became entrenched. Refugees from Somalia were hosted in nine camps around Jigjiga, largely established along clan lines; the largest, Hartisheikh, housed around 400,000 refugees (Hammond, 2014). Refugees from Sudan were hosted in camps in Gambella and Beninshangul-Gumuz. Notably, Gambella's camps were associated with significant negative experiences for communities in the region (see Box 1) and a historical legacy that to this day continues to shape perceptions and dynamics around the region's refugee response. Ethiopia's encampment approach was later solidified with the 2004 Refugee Proclamation, which required refugees to reside in camps and limited their access to basic rights, for example in relation to work and education (IRC, 2018).

Box 1   Refugee-hosting in the 1980s: dynamics in Gambella

The arrival of Sudanese refugees in Gambella in the 1980s had significant impacts for communities in the region. Refugee camps were effectively administered by Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) rebels; the SPLM/A operated freely in Gambella and established a training base in the region with the approval of the Derg regime, which viewed the government in Khartoum as a shared oppponent. As a result of the SPLM/A presence the security situation for local residents deteriorated.

Refugee movements to Gambella in the 1980s also had significant demographic consequences. Many Sudanese refugees were of Nuer origin, adding to an already growing Nuer community in the region. Over time, these shifts inflamed long-standing tensions between Gambella's Nuer and Anuak communities, rooted in disputes over historical claims to territory within the region. From 1994 the region's changing demography also gained increased political significance under the country's new system of ethnic federalism, which for the first time created Gambella as a separate region.

In 1984–1985, as refugee arrivals picked up pace, tensions over the region's shifting demographic balance were further complicated by the resettlement of 60,000 'highlanders' from famine-affected regions of the country to Gambella. These new arrivals came to dominate local labour markets, including employment in the region's fast-growing refugee operation. By 2007, census data showed that Anuak communities made up 21% of those living in the region, compared to 46% Nuer and 27% highlanders.

Sources: Bayissa, 2010; Feyissa, 2011; Carver et al., 2020b; Vemeru et al., 2020

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s Ethiopia's refugee population declined considerably, as developments in Somalia and Sudan – including the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement – led many refugees to return (Carver et al., 2020b; Ambroso, 2002; Hammond, 2014). By 2005 all of the Somali region camps, aside from Kebrebeyah, had been closed (Carver et al., 2020a), and in 2006–2008 Ethiopia's refugee population fell below 100,000 for the first time in over two decades. However, refugee numbers soon increased sharply again as instability worsened in Somalia from 2006 onwards, and in 2013 violence erupted again in South Sudan (Hammond, 2014; Nigusie and Carver, 2019; Vemeru et al., 2020). In both countries, already complex crises were exacerbated by famine, driving large-scale displacement from Somalia in 2011 and 2017, and from South Sudan in 2017.

From 2000 onwards Ethiopia also saw new refugee arrivals from Eritrea, fleeing an increasingly repressive regime, restrictions on movement and conscription (Feyissa and Mohamed, 2021; Ludi and Yohannes, 2020). Arrivals grew steadily following the 1998–2000 Ethiopia–Eritrea border war and accelerated in 2018, following the short-lived opening of Eritrea's border. In 2014 Ethiopia overtook Kenya to briefly become the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa (before being overtaken by Uganda two years later) (UNHCR, 2021a). By 2016 the country was hosting over 750,000 million refugees (see Figure 1).

As refugee numbers increased, camps were opened once again in Somali region, Gambella and Beninshangul-Gumuz. Notably, however, while camps were set up in Tigray and Afar regions to house Eritreans (Nigusie and Carver, 2019), from 2010 Eritreans who could show they had the financial means to support themselves and could secure an Ethiopian sponsor were permitted to relocate to urban centres as part of a new OCP. Analysts have ascribed this in part to the Ethiopian government's aspirations to influence the political landscape in Eritrea, supporting a loyal base of dissidents within the refugee population (REF, 2017). Despite well-documented shortcomings (Samuel Hall, 2014; REF, 2017) – including that the approach was never formalised in writing, resulting in a lack of clarity around the exact rights conferred on refugees – the OCP has remained a precedent for a different model of refugee-hosting in Ethiopia, and has in recent years informed wider policy reforms (see Section 3.2).

For an overview of key historical moments relating to refugees in Ethiopia, see Figure 3.

Figure 3 Timeline: refugees in Ethiopia

1969
Ethiopia accedes to the 1951 Refugee Convention,1967 Protocol and signs the OAU Refugee Convention

1987
Outbreak of civil war in Somalia triggers refugee movements into Ethiopia

2011
Famine in Somalia

2016
Ethiopia co-hosts the New York Leaders' Summit and commits to nine pledges

2017
Famine in Somalia and South Sudan sparks new displacement

2018
Abiy Ahmed takes office, following the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn

2020
Outbreak of conflict in Tigray from November

1983
Outbreak of civil war in Sudan triggers refugee movements into Ethiopia

1991
Derg regime in Ethiopia overthrown by the EPRDF; refugee movements from Somalia increase with the collapse of the Barre regime

2006
Increasing violence in Somalia drives refugees into Ethiopia

2010
Out of Camp Policy permits some Eritreans to live outside camps

2013
Conflict in newly independent South Sudan causes refugee movements into Ethiopia

2019
New Refugee Proclamation passed, expanding refugees' rights to work and freedom of movement

1974
Emperor Haile Salassie is overthrown; the Derg regime governs Ethiopia until 1991, triggering conflict and displacement

1984–1985
Famine in Ethiopia triggers displacement and internal resettlement

1998–2000
Ethiopia-Eritrea border war and beginning of Eritrean refugee arrivals

2004
Refugee Proclamation formalises encampment approach

2012
Death of Prime Minister Meles Zanawi marks the beginning of increasing internal instability in Ethiopia

Early 1960s–1972
Refugees fleeing civil war in Sudan are hosted in Gambella

Note: EPRDF = Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. OAU = Organisation of African Unity

2.2   Other migrants in Ethiopia

Displacement patterns in Ethiopia have often overlapped with broader forms of mobility. Over time, refugee movements have been accompanied by those of individuals – many from the same countries of origin (in particular Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan) – seeking education, employment and to join family in Ethiopia, or in some cases moving as part of long-standing pastoralist traditions.

These dynamics often make it difficult to draw clear dividing lines between 'refugees' and 'other migrants' in Ethiopia. In particular, several key refugee-hosting regions are characterised by long-standing traditions of mobility across contemporary boundaries. For example, ethnic Somalis have long migrated across territories in modern-day Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia – that have often operated as a single economic and cultural space – as part of traditional nomadic patterns and resilience strategies (Hammond, 2014; Carruth, 2018; Carver et al., 2020a). Similarly, Nuer communities have for centuries migrated between modern-day Sudan and Ethiopia, for a broad spectrum of reasons. Mobility forms a key part of Nuer identity, with contemporary boundaries viewed as essentially permeable (Feyissa and Hoehne, 2010; Feyissa, 2013).

3 Current trends and policy approaches

3.1 Current refugee and migrant populations

In mid-2020, Ethiopia hosted an estimated 1.1 million refugees and other migrants, representing 0.9% of the overall population – well below the average for Africa (1.9%) and the third-lowest proportion among the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)'s eight member states (UN DESA, 2020).[1] According to UN DESA data, the vast majority of these individuals originate from neighbouring countries, with over 97% from Somali, South Sudan, Eritrea, Sudan and Djibouti (ibid.). However, official statistics are likely to undercount certain groups, for example migrants who have crossed into Ethiopia informally, or unregistered refugees in urban areas.

As of August 2021, Ethiopia was hosting 795,108 refugees (UNHCR, 2021b), representing the third-largest refugee population in Africa (UNHCR, 2021c). Almost half of all refugees hosted in Ethiopia are from South Sudan (see Figure 4), alongside significant populations from Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan, and smaller numbers from elsewhere in Africa and further afield (UNHCR, 2021a; 2021b). In 2020 refugees and asylum-seekers made up over two-thirds of all foreign nationals registered in the country (UN DESA, 2020).

Until the outbreak of conflict in Tigray in late 2021 (see Box 2), the majority of refugees were located in 26 camps spread across five regions of Ethiopia. South Sudanese refugees primarily resided in camps in Gambella (as well as smaller numbers in Beninshangul-Gumuz), with camps for refugees from Somalia in Somali region, Eritrean camps in Tigray and Afar and smaller numbers from Sudan and the Great Lakes in Beninshangul-Gumuz. The conflict in Tigray has had a considerable impact on Eritreans living in the region, including the destruction of two camps. Many Eritreans have since fled to other parts of Ethiopia and into neighbouring countries, with a new camp opened in Amhara region to host Eritreans displaced from Tigray.

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1   IGAD is an eight-country trade bloc spanning the Horn of Africa, Nile Valley and Great Lakes. Other member states include Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda. In 2020, within IGAD only Somalia and Eritrea registered a lower proportion of international migrants as a percentage of the total population, at 0.4% in both countries (UN DESA, 2020).

Figure 4   Current refugee populations in Ethiopia by country of origin
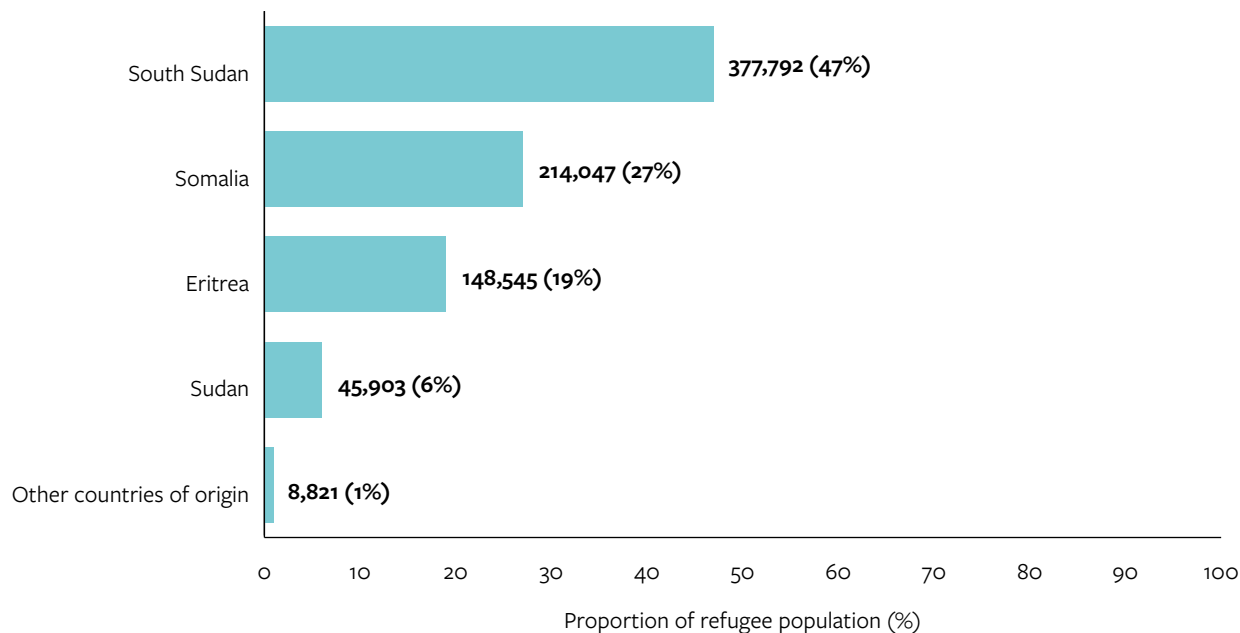
Note: Refugees categorised under 'other countries of origin' include those from Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen and Syria, as well as smaller numbers from elsewhere.
Source: UNHCR, 2021b

While encampment remains the dominant approach, significant numbers also reside in urban areas, with UNHCR recording over 50,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in Addis Ababa alone (UNHCR, 2021b). This encompasses Eritreans under the OCP, refugees under the Urban Assistance Programme and those (for example from Syria or Yemen) without designated camps (Mena, 2018; Vemeru et al., 2020). These figures are likely to be an underestimate as they do not include those who have relocated to urban areas without official permission and groups of unregistered asylum-seekers (Mena, 2018). Significant numbers of refugees in Afar also live outside camps, with higher levels of de facto integration with local communities in comparison to other regions (Feyissa and Mohamed, 2021).

Alongside Ethiopia's role as a host to refugees and other migrants, the country has also emerged as a major transit point – and country of origin – for mixed migration within the Horn of Africa and towards South Africa, the Gulf, the Middle East and Europe (RMMS, 2016; Carter and Rohwerder, 2016). Those transiting the country – sometimes briefly, and in other cases as part of longer, less linear journeys – span refugees, trafficked persons and those migrating in search of opportunities, largely from neighbouring countries. Significant attention has been paid to Eritreans making onward journeys from Ethiopia towards other countries in the region and further afield (Ludi and Yohannes, 2020).

Box 2   The crisis in Tigray

Since November 2020, Tigray region has been at the centre of an unpredictable and fast-escalating conflict between federal government and Tigrayan forces. Despite a ceasefire declared by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in June 2021, clashes continue to be reported, with the conflict spreading to neighbouring Afar and Amhara regions, and regional forces from around the country drawn in to support the federal military. An estimated two million people have been internally displaced and tens of thousands have fled to neighbouring Sudan. With crops, agricultural infrastructure and key transport links destroyed, 400,000 people in Tigray are estimated to be facing famine, with a further 1.8 million on the brink.

Eritrean refugees hosted in Tigray have experienced significant impacts, not least due to the involvement of Eritrean forces on the side of the federal government, linked to the destruction of two Eritrean camps (Hitsats and Shimelba) and alleged forcible returns of Eritreans. Many Eritreans are reportedly in hiding and have dispersed throughout the region, to Addis Ababa and towards Sudan, Kenya and elsewhere. Refugees, largely dependent on humanitarian support before the crisis, have also been affected by challenges to humanitarian access within the region, with the remaining two Tigrayan camps (Adi Harush and Mai Aini) largely inaccessible at the time of writing.

Sources: New Humanitarian, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020a; 2021a; 2021b; Endeshaw and Mersie, 2021; Gerth-Niculescu, 2021; Horwood, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2021; IOM, 2021a; Reuters, 2021; UNHCR, 2021d

3.2 Refugee policy approaches

Refugee policy approaches in Ethiopia have been in significant flux in recent years. Overall, the dominant approach remains encampment and care and maintenance, with limited formal opportunities to work for most refugees. This is centralised under the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), since 2018 under the oversight of the newly established Ministry of Peace. However, recent years have seen policy-level commitments signalling the federal government's intent to move away from care and maintenance, including through expansion of the OCP and reforms to refugees' right to work.

Ethiopia has been at the forefront of regional and global policy developments anchored around supporting refugees' inclusion and self-reliance. At the regional level, it is party to various key IGAD frameworks.[2] At the global level, in 2016 Ethiopia co-hosted the New York Leaders' Summit

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2   Recent IGAD frameworks include the 2017 Nairobi Declaration on durable solutions for Somali refugees, the 2017 Djibouti Declaration on refugee education and the 2019 Kampala Declaration on jobs, livelihoods and self-reliance.

on Refugees, making nine pledges across various sectors, and in 2019 it co-hosted the first Global Refugee Forum, where additional pledges were announced (for a summary of recent pledges see Table 1). In 2017 Ethiopia also became a pilot country for the CRRF, announcing a roadmap and various institutional structures to guide its implementation (Nigusie and Carver, 2019; Carver, 2020). As the most tangible outcome to date from these commitments, in January 2019 the government of Ethiopia passed a new Refugee Proclamation – followed later that year by two further directives – significantly expanding refugees' rights, including in relation to freedom of movement, rights to work, and access to education and other key services (Maru, 2019; UNHCR, 2019a; 2020b).

Table 1   Recent pledges

Thematic area	2016 Leaders' Summit pledges	2019 Global Refugee Forum pledges
Access to work and job creation	Provide work permits to refugees with permanent residence identification. Provide work permits to refugees in areas permitted for foreign workers. Make 10,000 hectares of irrigable land available to 100,000 people (refugees and hosts) for crop production. Develop industrial parks, to employ up to 100,000 individuals, with 30% of jobs reserved for refugees.	Create up to 90,000 socio-economic opportunities through agricultural and livestock value chains benefiting refugees and host communities. Quality and accredited skills training to 20,000 host community members and refugees on an equitable basis, taking labour market demand and linkages into account.
Freedom of movement	Expand OCP to 10% of Ethiopia's refugee population.	
Access to key services	Increase enrolment in pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary education among all qualified refugees without discrimination and within available resources. Enhance provision of basic social services to refugees.	Market-based and sustainable household and facility-based energy solutions for three million host community members and refugees, through clean and renewable energy sources. Strength the government of Ethiopia's asylum system and social protection capacity.
Documentation	Make more documentation available to refugees, including by issuing birth certificates to refugee children and the possibility to obtain driving identification.	
Local integration	Make local integration available to refugees who have been in Ethiopia for more than 20 years.	

Sources: Government of Ethiopia, 2019a; Vemeru et al., 2020

While the 2019 Proclamation represents a promising step in a more fundamental rethink of Ethiopia's long-established refugee response, many aspects remain qualified or unclear (see Box 5). In particular, significant work remains to translate its provisions into meaningful changes in practice at local levels, including through further secondary legislation (Nigusie and Carver, 2019; Vemeru et al., 2020). While there are signs of progress – for example, with the number of freedom-of-movement permits issued almost doubling from 2018 to 2019 and over 2,000 work permits distributed to refugees since 2019 – the vast majority of refugees have not yet seen practical impacts from these policy shifts (Graham and Miller, 2021).

Recent political turmoil in the country, which has significantly worsened over the past year, has also led to reduced momentum around the implementation of promised reforms, as political attention has instead turned to internal instability, high levels of internal displacement and deteriorating economic conditions (see Box 3), and the Covid-19 pandemic has had a similar impact on momentum.

Foreign policy developments under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed have also led to shifting approaches to refugee policy, bringing the country's long-held open-door approach into question. In particular, this includes the warming of relations with Eritrea following a peace agreement in 2018. In 2020, these foreign policy and diplomatic considerations led the Ethiopian government to revoke Eritreans' prima facie status, ending over 10 years of automatic recognition (UNHCR, 2020a). More recently, Ethiopia's federal government signalled its intent to make a similar move with regard to South Sudanese refugees, although interviews for this study suggested that this was no longer actively being pursued at the time of writing.

In combination, these factors have led to a highly complex and uncertain policy environment, in a context with significant variation in how formal policies are implemented in practice across different parts of the country (Nigusie and Carver, 2020). For example, despite official limitations on refugees' ability to work, many have played an active role in local economies (see Box 4). Approaches to freedom of movement have long differed between regions and camps across the country (Samuel Hall, 2018; Carver et al., 2020a). More recently, coordination around implementation of CRRF commitments has varied between refugee-hosting regions, with the greatest early progress in Somali region (Nigusie and Carver, 2019). Overall, this leads to significant fragmentation, which has in recent years been exacerbated by wide-ranging and sometimes uncoordinated approaches by international donors.

Box 3   Increasing internal instability

Ethiopia has seen increasing instability since the death of former Prime Minister Meles Zanawi in 2012, who held office for almost two decades. This instability has escalated significantly in recent years. In 2015–2016 and 2018 mass anti-government protests broke out in Oromo region, later spreading to Amhara. The protests were fuelled by a range of issues, including discontent over the balance of power between different groups as part of Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system of government and concerns over livelihoods. The protests were met with a violent government response.

In early 2018, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office that April, articulating a vision for bringing together Ethiopia's multiple ethnic groups under a more cohesive national identity. However, his time in office has largely been dominated by increasingly violent conflicts and high levels of internal displacement. This has often been driven by ethnic divisions and exacerbated by tensions over land and resources. In 2018 almost 2.9 million people were displaced in Ethiopia as a result of conflict and violence, the highest figure ever recorded for the country. In 2020 those newly displaced numbered 1.7 million, including as a result of the conflict in Tigray, as well as violence in other regions, including Afar, Amhara, Beninshangul-Gumuz and Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's region (SNNP).

In addition to its mounting human toll, this internal instability, combined with the Covid-19 pandemic, has also had a significant economic impact. According to the United Nations, the conflict in Tigray is estimated to have cost the country's finances over a billion dollars, in addition to its wider impacts, including disrupted economic activity in the region. While previously one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa, uncertainty over the spread of conflict and wider concerns from foreign investors have led to a challenging economic climate and stalling economic growth. These economic difficulties have exacted a significant toll on communities already suffering high rates of poverty and unemployment. In July 2021, basic consumer goods were estimated to have increased in price by around a quarter compared to the previous year.

Sources: Human Rights Watch, 2016; BBC, 2018; Kestler-D'Amours, 2018; Carver, 2020; BBC, 2021; Economist, 2021; Graham and Miller, 2021; IDMC, 2021; IOM, 2021a

Box 4   Refugees' economic inclusion and private sector engagement

Refugees have long played a role in local economies in Ethiopia, largely as a result of the initiative of individual refugees and Ethiopian business owners, particularly those with social connections and financial resources, including from remittances. Refugees have acted as customers for local businesses, employees and business partners for local private sector actors (often as part of informal arrangements) and played a role as business owners and entrepreneurs. Their presence has also brought in business and employment to refugee-hosting regions as a result of substantial humanitarian operations.

That said, refugees are far from achieving economic inclusion in Ethiopia, in general having lower rates of employment compared to their hosts, being more likely to rely on aid and experiencing lower average household consumption. Recent years have seen increased attention to refugees' economic inclusion, linked to policy commitments and shifts around the CRRF. This has been the focus of substantial international investment, much of which has sought to build on market links and private sector engagement. Progress has, however, been slow, due to challenges including legal barriers, lack of coordination between approaches piloted by different donors, wider weaknesses in Ethiopia's private sector and the remoteness of key refugee-hosting regions.

Various initiatives have nonetheless emerged, albeit many still in initial pilot phases. This includes $550 million invested by the European Union, United Kingdom and World Bank in a **Jobs Compact for Ethiopia**, aimed at creating 100,000 jobs in industrial parks, including for 30,000 refugees. Other approaches have focused on stimulating the local private sector in refugee-hosting areas, while seeking to promote refugees' labour market inclusion; examples include work through the **EU Trust Fund** in Somali region and the UK government's **Strengthening Host and Refugees Populations in Ethiopia (SHARPE) programme** in Somali and Gambella. Initiatives have often focused on training and other forms of support to livelihoods, including GIZ's **Qualification and Employment Perspectives (QEP) programme**, which offers vocational training and employment opportunities to refugees and Ethiopians, building on partnerships with over 70 Ethiopian companies.

Recent years have also seen a focus on the role of larger Ethiopian businesses and international private sector actors in refugee-hosting areas, in terms of philanthropic investments and service provision. Perhaps most notable is the **IKEA Foundation's** investment in the Dollo Ado camps in Somali region, totalling $100 million from 2011 to 2018 and representing the largest private sector investment in refugee camps anywhere in the world. While initially focused on emergency relief, over time this has shifted towards promoting livelihood opportunities for refugees and host community members. Other examples include the **Shire Alliance**, a public–private partnership including three European energy companies, focused on building energy services in Shire, and **Dedebit**, a microfinance institution in Tigray region that has supplied in-kind support to refugees in the form of loans.

Sources: Shire Alliance, n.d.; Ministry of Agriculture, 2016; Brown et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2018; Betts et al., 2019a; 2019b; 2020; Nigusie and Carver, 2019; GIZ, 2020; Hargrave et al., 2020a; Samuel Hall, 2020; Vemeru et al., 2020; Graham and Miller, 2021

3.3   Policies towards other migrants

Cross-border mobility is regulated by the 2003 Immigration Proclamation and counterpart 2004 Regulations, which set out requirements for foreign nationals entering or departing the country (see Box 5). Ethiopia has also adopted global and regional frameworks relevant to wider mobility, including in 2018 the Global Compact for Migration and revised African Union (AU) Migration Policy Framework for Africa, and in 2020 the IGAD Protocol on Free Movement of Persons (IOM, 2019; 2020; ILO, 2021).

However, as elsewhere in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia's long and porous borders have proved difficult to enforce, with significant informal mobility continuing despite immigration provisions (Ambroso, 2002). More recently, mobility into Ethiopia was significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, with all of the country's official land borders closed in March 2020 and quarantine restrictions imposed on air arrivals (Al Jazeera, 2020b). At the time of writing, Covid-19 testing restrictions for arrivals remained in place; several land border points have been reopened, although others remain closed, now as a result of the conflict in Tigray and tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan (IOM, 2021b; UK Government, 2021).

Recent years have seen discussions on whether Ethiopia should establish a comprehensive migration policy (Ogahara and Kuschminder, 2019). However, this is yet to materialise and overall coordination across government on migration remains inconsistent. Aside from reforms to legislation concerning refugees, the most prominent policy developments concern the emigration of Ethiopians, including the country's first Diaspora Policy in 2013, as well as recent legislation regarding overseas employment and reintegration (Carter and Rohwerder, 2016; Ogahara

and Kuschminder, 2019). The past decade has also seen a significant focus on smuggling and trafficking, including the establishment of a National Trafficking taskforce and the introduction of dedicated legislation and national plan of action (REF, 2017; Ogahara and Kuschminder, 2019).

Box 5   Overview of current immigration, refugee and citizenship policies

Immigration policy

All foreign nationals require a visa to enter Ethiopia, aside from citizens of Djibouti and Kenya, for whom bilateral exemptions are in place. A visa on arrival facility is available to citizens of African Union member states, alongside 29 other countries. Foreigners intending to stay in Ethiopia for over 90 days must apply for temporary residence status. Permanent residence status is available for those married to Ethiopian citizens, and individuals who have lived in Ethiopia for three years, have sufficient income to support themselves, or who are engaged in investment or humanitarian work. Aside from certain exemptions, for example for diplomats, foreigners require permits to work in Ethiopia; these are issued for a specific type of work and with a specific employer for up to three years. However, these often prove difficult to obtain due to complex bureaucracy and are granted under conditions intended to protect jobs for Ethiopians.

Asylum and refugee policy

South Sudanese refugees, Sudanese refugees from Blue Nile and South Kordofan, Yemenis arriving after 2015 and Somalis from South and Central Somalia can receive prima facie status in Ethiopia. Refugees from elsewhere, including since 2020 Eritrea, must undergo individual refugee status determination.

Refugees' rights are elaborated in the 2019 Refugee Proclamation. While encampment remains the dominant approach, the government has committed to an expansion of those permitted to live outside of camps under the OCP, previously restricted to Eritreans, on the condition that they have the means to support themselves and can obtain an Ethiopian sponsor. Underscoring this policy shift, the recent Proclamation guarantees refugees' freedom to choose their place of residence. However, the new law contains key ambiguities in this respect, also stipulating that ARRA 'may arrange places or areas within which refugee and asylum-seekers may live'. Outside of the OCP, refugees are also permitted to live outside camps if they qualify for the Urban Assistance Programme, for example due to medical or protection needs. Despite aspirations for more integrated service delivery, key services continue to be provided to refugees through parallel systems, although in practice some refugees access host community schools and hospitals (and vice versa).

The 2019 Proclamation contains key provisions on refugees' right to work – although remaining limited in key respects – with refugees permitted to apply for residence permits to facilitate work on projects in specific sectors jointly designed by the Ethiopian government and the international community. The law stipulates that, otherwise, refugees may apply for work permits, to be issued on the same basis as to other foreigners. Other key rights in the 2019 Proclamation include access on the same basis as nationals to healthcare, pre-primary and primary education, justice and registration of vital events (for example births, deaths and marriages); access to telecommunications, banking and financial services; access on a par with other foreigners to secondary education and to own property; and the right, though not further elaborated, to local integration for refugees in a protracted situation.

Citizenship policy

The 2003 Proclamation on Ethiopian Nationality defines how citizenship can be acquired and lost, and associated rights. Individuals can become naturalised citizens of Ethiopia if they have been married to an Ethiopian citizen for at least two years or have lived in the country for at least four years and fulfil certain other criteria. The 2019 Refugee Proclamation confirms that asylum-seekers or refugees are eligible for naturalisation on the same basis.

Sources: INVEA, 2021a; 2021b; FALO, 2021a; 2021b; UNHCR, 2019a; 2020e; 2020f; Government of Ethiopia, 2003; 2019b; 2019c; 2019d; Vemeru et al., 2020

4 Public and political narratives

There are multiple, overlapping narratives in Ethiopia concerning refugees and other migrants. This chapter distinguishes between:

- **Local narratives:** spanning narratives emerging within Ethiopia's refugee-hosting regions, involving a range of different actors, for example local media outlets, regional and sub-regional governance, more locally rooted civil society actors, as well as local leaders and individuals within refugee and host communities.
- **National narratives:** including those advanced by the federal government for domestic audiences, narratives from national media outlets and those within federal-level policy debates (for example, on the part of larger civil society organisations or national political actors).
- **International narratives:** including those advanced by the Ethiopian government on the international stage and in engagement with international actors.

This chapter focuses primarily on narratives surrounding refugees, which existing literature and key informant interviews discussed in more depth. However, in many cases these overlap with wider narratives around other groups of migrants in the country, with, as noted above, distinctions between groups of foreign nationals often blurred in practice.

4.1 Local narratives

In general, issues surrounding refugees have greatest prominence in local public discourse within refugee-hosting regions of Ethiopia, as well urban centres where significant refugee populations are located. Overall it is difficult to generalise in terms of local narratives, with distinct dynamics emerging with regard to different groups of refugees, as well as between regions, local communities and even individuals. As in other contexts, these narratives balance a complex range of factors: on the one hand, spanning perceptions of positive cultural or economic impacts and shared cultural ties with specific refugee communities (Betts et al., 2019b; Carver, 2020; Vemeru et al., 2020); and on the other, concerns about perceived negative impacts of refugees' presence, for example connected to security concerns, cultural changes, economic impacts (such as rising prices or unemployment) and environmental degradation (Carver et al., 2020b; Ludi and Yohannes, 2020; Vemeru et al., 2020). In some cases, this is framed in terms of perceptions of refugees being better off than local populations or receiving preferential treatment and higher-quality services (Samuel Hall, 2018; Carver, 2020; Vemeru et al., 2020).

Narratives around refugees intersect with complex conceptions of national identity among Ethiopians which, as outlined above, are rooted in Ethiopia's history of state formation, and have since the 1990s gained political significance under the country's system of ethnic federalism. These issues have become increasingly sensitive in recent years as a result of growing internal

instability, and have sparked communal tensions, conflict and internal displacement (Boxes 2 and 3). They have also led to tensions around internal migration in some parts of the country, including challenging and sensitive questions over which Ethiopians have the right to live where.

These conceptions of identity play out differently in different parts of the country, shaping distinct local narratives in Ethiopia's refugee-hosting regions. First and foremost is the extent to which refugees are seen as distinct from local populations, particularly where groups of refugees share ethnic, cultural and historical ties with their hosts. Wider factors shaping distinct narratives include different regions' historical experiences of refugee-hosting and its impacts, characteristics of refugee populations being hosted (for example length of stay and skills profiles), as well as local politics and relationships between regional authorities and Ethiopia's federal government (REF, 2017; Carver, 2020; Vemeru et al., 2020).

Illustrating these distinctions, in Gambella narratives relating to (predominantly Nuer) South Sudanese refugees are strongly shaped by historical tensions between Anuak and Nuer communities, including contested claims to land and control of political power (Feyissa, 2010; 2015; Carver et al., 2020b). This is underscored by negative historical experiences of refugee-hosting and its links to a changing ethnic balance in the region (discussed in Box 1). One key informant noted that this had led to a common narrative within Anuak communities that 'they [refugees] came to take our territory and land'.

In contrast, in Somali region, local narratives are shaped by a long history of mobility and cultural ties between ethnic Somalis, blurring distinctions between refugees and hosts. Instead, perceptions of difference tend to be formed along clan lines (transcending international boundaries), and between ethnic Somalis and outsiders from 'highland' areas of the country. In general, refugees' presence is considered a relatively low priority, although with strong recognition of the social and economic benefits it has brought to the region (Carver et al., 2020a; Samuel Hall, 2020; Vemeru et al., 2020). Similarly, in Afar region, local communities and authorities alike have emphasised cultural ties with ethnically Afar refugees from Eritrea, viewed as a valuable labour resource and preferred for work compared to internal migrants from elsewhere in Ethiopia (Feyissa and Mohamed, 2021).

Several key informants also highlighted their perception that, while narratives concerning refugees have remained relatively consistent over time within local communities, the past year has seen rapid change, particularly in narratives surrounding Eritreans. In Addis Ababa, key informants related that negative narratives had predated the conflict in Tigray, including complaints that Eritreans had contributed to price increases and concerns surrounding their alleged involvement in fights and alcohol abuse. However, one refugee representative in Addis Ababa related that Eritreans had also often previously been depicted as 'brothers', due to shared historical and cultural ties. The role of Eritrean forces in the highly polarising conflict in Tigray has undoubtedly complicated these

dynamics, with narratives around Eritreans shifting in line with individual stances on the conflict. For example, another key informant spoke of an increasing sense of suspicion among some in local communities, with Eritreans viewed as 'spies' for the Eritrean government.

4.2 National narratives

At the national level, key agencies such as ARRA openly promote their work with refugees through social media and other channels. However, key informants interviewed for this study suggested that proactive engagement tends to be sporadic and centred around key moments, for example World Refugee Day, with perceptions of a general reluctance to put too much in the public domain domestically. Likewise, several key informants emphasised that refugee issues are rarely covered by national media outlets. In general, refugee issues are not viewed as a national priority in comparison to other issues, including concerns around jobs and unemployment (discussed in Box 6), internal instability and broader questions surrounding ethnic identity and governance.

Yet key informants also emphasised the potential for refugee issues to cut through to national debate, particularly when connected to broader concerns and mobilised by influential actors. For example, there were heated discussions during the recent Refugee Proclamation's passage through parliament, with opposition from prominent political activists and policy analysts, linked to the alleged impacts of the legislation for Ethiopian nationals (see, for example, Jemaneh, 2019). In response to criticism, the government sought to highlight the benefits of the bill for Ethiopian citizens. For example, the head of the Ethiopian Investment Commission took to social media to emphasise the legislation's connection to Ethiopia's Jobs Compact, which he argued 'helps refugees and supports Ethiopia's industrialisation' (Bhalla, 2019).

The moment also served as a reminder of the potential for federal-level discussions to come into conflict with those at local levels. While the Proclamation eventually passed, opposition included ruling party members of parliament, in particular from Gambella, motivated by local-level concerns. More broadly, questions have been raised as to how effectively key policy developments – including around the CRRF and the Refugee Proclamation – have been communicated at local levels, despite some efforts towards outreach and consultation (Carver, 2020; Samuel Hall, 2020; Vemeru et al., 2020).

Box 6   Wider attitudes in Ethiopia

Attitudes towards refugees and other migrants should be understood in the context of wider societal attitudes. Afrobarometer polling, last conducted in December 2019 to January 2020, provides a useful snapshot. However, it should be noted that this data was collected prior to both the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 and the outbreak of conflict in Tigray in November 2020, and thus does not represent any changes that may have emerged as a result.

In 2020, Afrobarometer found that many Ethiopians were negative about government performance across various issues. Over six in 10 ranked the government's performance as fairly or very bad in terms of keeping prices stable (87%), narrowing the gap between rich and poor (77%), providing a reliable supply of electricity (72%), improving living standards of the poor (64%) and creating jobs (62%). When asked to select the three most important problems facing the country, the most common responses were water supply, infrastructure, electricity, management of the economy and crime and security. Afrobarometer's data also captures notably high levels of trust in religious and traditional leaders, far more so than other actors, with 89% and 85% respectively saying that they trusted these actors somewhat or a lot.

Less than a third of those surveyed identified primarily in terms of national identity, with the largest group (42%) saying that they felt equally aligned to their ethnic identity. Just under half (48%) said that their ethnic group was treated unfairly by the government, though less than a third (30%) reported being treated unfairly by other Ethiopians in the past year based on their ethnicity. While it is possible sentiment has shifted since the poll was conducted, almost three-quarters (72%) felt that there was more that unites Ethiopians than divides them, the fourth highest proportion across 18 countries surveyed. A similar proportion (74%) agreed that communities were stronger when made up of diverse ethnic groups, races and religions.

Sources: Afrobarometer, 2020; Logan et al., 2020

4.3   International narratives

Finally, key informants also pointed to how controversy around the Refugee Proclamation had highlighted tensions between narratives advanced by Ethiopia's federal government domestically and in its discussions on the international stage. In recent years, international agencies and donors alike have applauded Ethiopia as an example of good practice for refugee-hosting within the region, with the Refugee Proclamation lauded as 'one of the most progressive refugee policies in Africa' and a 'model for refugee hosting nations around the world' (UNHCR, 2019b). However,

some key informants suggested that this enthusiastic public praise had potentially created domestic political challenges for the government, exacerbating misunderstandings in terms of the legislation's scope.

For its part, the government has positioned itself on the international stage as a welcoming host to refugees, often drawing on Ethiopians' own experiences as refugees and the country's long history of offering shelter to those fleeing persecution. For example, speaking at the first Global Refugee Forum in 2019, Ethiopia's Deputy Prime Minister spoke of his country's 'proud history of providing protection and assistance to refugees and asylum seekers which dates back to the seventh century', and stressed the country's continued open-door policy despite '[Ethiopia's'] own developmental challenges and limited resources' (Government of Ethiopia, 2019a: 5).

As discussed in Section 3.2, in recent years Ethiopia has been particularly active in global and regional fora, as a co-convenor of international summits and a proponent of numerous – and considerable – pledges. In such fora the government has positioned itself as a key player in emerging approaches centred on refugees' inclusion, while being clear about the impacts of refugee-hosting for Ethiopia's own communities and the need for greater international responsibility-sharing.

While many key informants interviewed for this study believed this stance was rooted in genuine commitment to reform, particularly on the part of Ethiopia's previous administration, it is equally true that the country has seen numerous benefits as a result. Ethiopia's engagement on refugee issues has undoubtedly bolstered its standing on the international stage; although this standing has more recently been negatively impacted by the wider diplomatic fallout from the crisis in Tigray (International Crisis Group, 2021). Ethiopia has also attracted substantial financial and technical resources for the refugee response, including as part of pilot approaches linked to the CRRF rollout (Nigusie and Carver, 2019). This has included significant financial commitments from traditional actors, such as the European Union and bilateral donors, as well as more newly engaged sources of financing, for example the World Bank and international private sector (see Box 4).

Many of these investments have been framed in terms depicting refugees as active contributors to Ethiopia's development, highlighting efforts to harness their contributions as part of local economies and towards Ethiopia's wider industrialisation strategy. Key informants suggested that, while such narratives have for the most part been driven by international actors, the government has been a willing player in this discourse, in the process leveraging significant gains for its own citizens.

More broadly, Ethiopia's prominent role as a host to refugees within the Horn of Africa has given the government a seat at the table as part of regional discussions with regard to peacebuilding in Somalia and South Sudan. Indeed, Ethiopia's CRRF Roadmap elaborates that the government's approach to refugee-hosting is in part rooted in efforts to 'materialize [sic] its foreign policy goal of building sustainable peace with all of its neighbours through strengthening people to people relations' (Government of Ethiopia, 2018: 3).

5   Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

5.1   Broad immigration attitudes: insights from national polling data

Like other countries in sub-Saharan and East Africa (Hargrave et al., 2020a; 2020b), polling data on attitudes towards refugees and other migrants in Ethiopia is limited compared to high-income countries (Leach and Hargrave, 2020). Recent data includes polling by Afrobarometer and the World Values Survey, both conducted in early 2020, which included questions on attitudes towards having migrants as neighbours, respondents' immigration policy preferences and perspectives on the impacts of immigration on the country's development.[3]

However, the questions asked in these surveys are framed in terms of attitudes towards 'immigrants' or 'foreign workers' in a broad sense, and do not specifically solicit attitudes concerning refugees. In addition, it is difficult to distinguish regionally specific dynamics in key refugee-hosting areas from nationally representative survey data, with the number of those sampled in these regions (for example, in Gambella) low compared to other areas of the country. Questions measuring attitudes towards immigration have not been conducted consistently over time, making it difficult to evaluate how attitudes have evolved. While relatively recent, both the World Values Survey and Afrobarometer's most recent survey rounds also predate the crisis in Tigray, meaning that any shifts in attitudes that may have occurred due to the conflict are not reflected in the results. Nonetheless, this data presents various relevant insights, not least in a context that has seen significant overlap between refugee dynamics and wider migration movements.

Available data suggests that migration and refugee-hosting do not appear particularly salient issues for the Ethiopian public. According to Afrobarometer's 2020 polling, neither appear to be a common answer when respondents were asked about the most important problems facing the country; instead, respondents prioritised issues such as water supply, infrastructure, electricity provision, crime and security (see Box 6).[4]

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3   Earlier survey data is also available from Gallup and Pew Global.
4   Afrobarometer's questionnaire solicits free responses to this question, which are later coded into different categories. Less than 1% of those surveyed gave answers coded by Afroabarometer as 'other responses' when asked to list the three most important issues facing the country. It is presumed here that immigration and refugee-hosting would be included under 'other responses', falling outside other given categories.

In 2020 Afrobarometer's polling found that almost two-thirds (64%) of Ethiopians would like having 'immigrants or foreign workers' as neighbours, with just 17% saying they would dislike it (Afrobarometer, 2020).[5] However, recent data also indicates significant support for restrictive policy measures. In 2020, the World Values Survey found that just over half of those surveyed (51%) supported either putting 'strict limits' on immigration or prohibiting it altogether (World Values Survey, 2020). According to the same data, Ethiopians also appear split on whether immigrants have had positive or negative impacts on the country's development (see Figure 5).

When asked about more specific impacts, over half of Ethiopians felt that immigration had strengthened cultural diversity and filled useful jobs in the workforce (see Figure 6). However, majorities also associated immigrants with negative impacts, including in relation to crime, terrorism, social conflict and unemployment. Significantly, around seven in 10 of those surveyed felt that immigrants had increased unemployment, the seventh highest proportion of 51 countries surveyed worldwide (see Figure 7) and likely linked to broader concerns regarding the country's economy (see Box 6).

Figure 5   Perception of impact of immigrants on Ethiopia's development – positive or negative (2020)

- Quite/rather bad: 39.6%
- Neither good nor bad: 22.0%
- Quite/very good: 36.8%
- Don't know: 1.6%
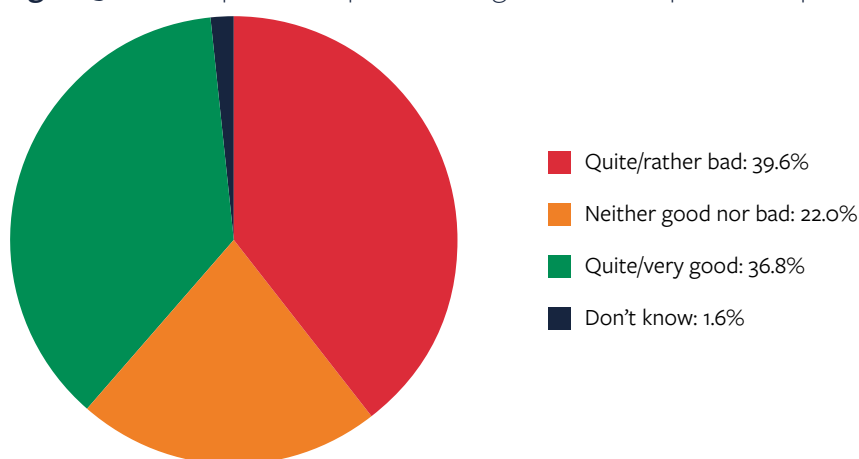
Note: This figure shows the proportion of respondents selecting each response listed to the following question: 'Now we would like to know your opinion about the people from other countries who come to live in Ethiopia - the immigrants. How would you evaluate the impact of these people on the development of Ethiopia?'.
Source: World Values Survey, 2020

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5   World Values Survey data from 2020 presents a similar picture, finding that 16% of Ethiopians would dislike having immigrants or foreign workers as neighbours (World Values Survey, 2020).

Figure 6 Perception of impact of immigrants on Ethiopia's development – specific impacts (2020)
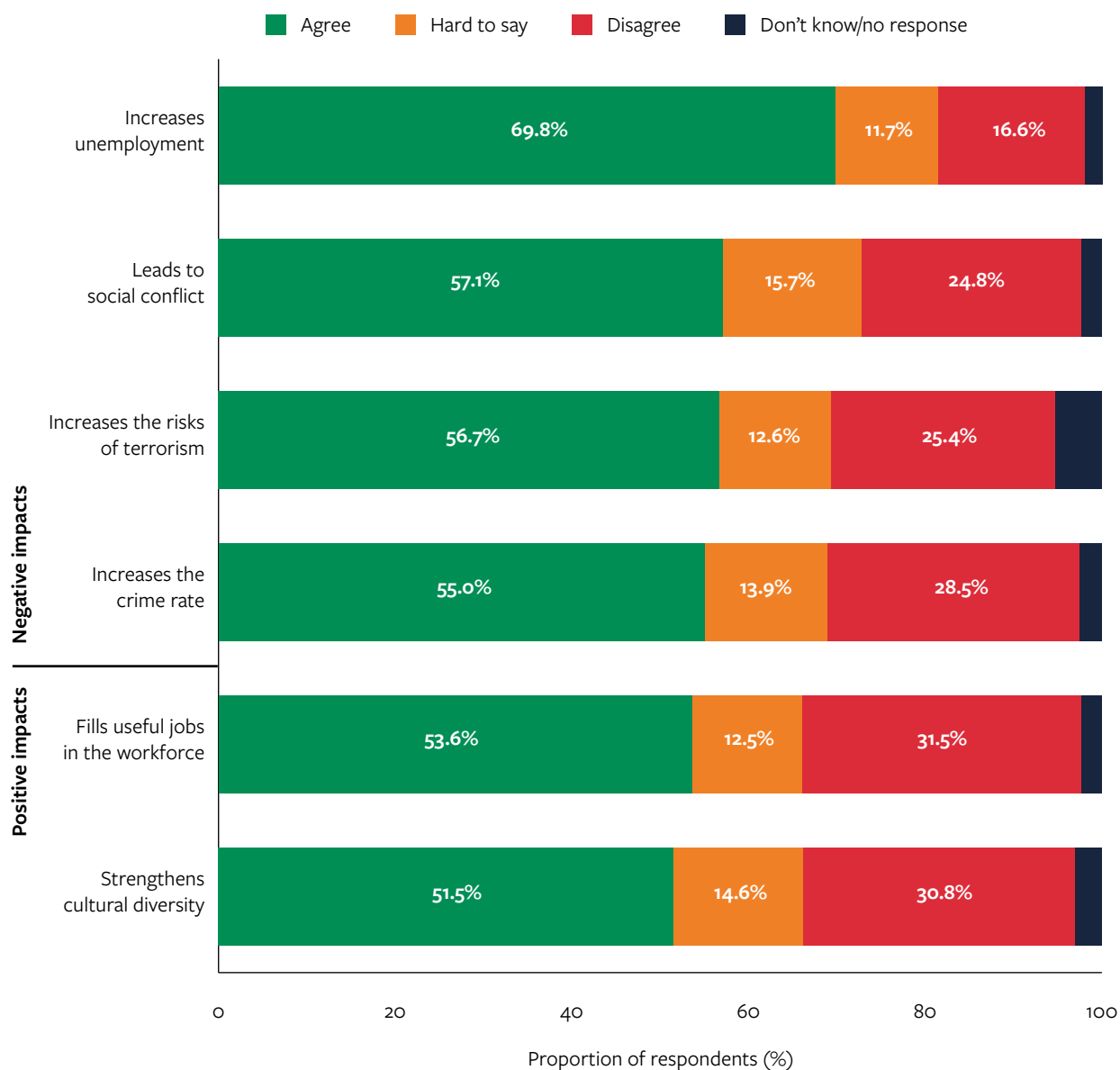
Note: This figure shows the proportion of respondents that agreed with each of the following options when asked: 'From your point of view, what have been the effects of immigrants on the development of Ethiopia?' [Leads to social conflict/increases the crime rate/increases the risks of terrorism/increases unemployment/fills useful jobs in the workforce/strengthens cultural diversity]

Source: World Values Survey, 2020

Figure 7 Proportion agreeing that immigrants increase unemployment – global comparison (2017–2020)

Proportion of respondents agreeing (%)
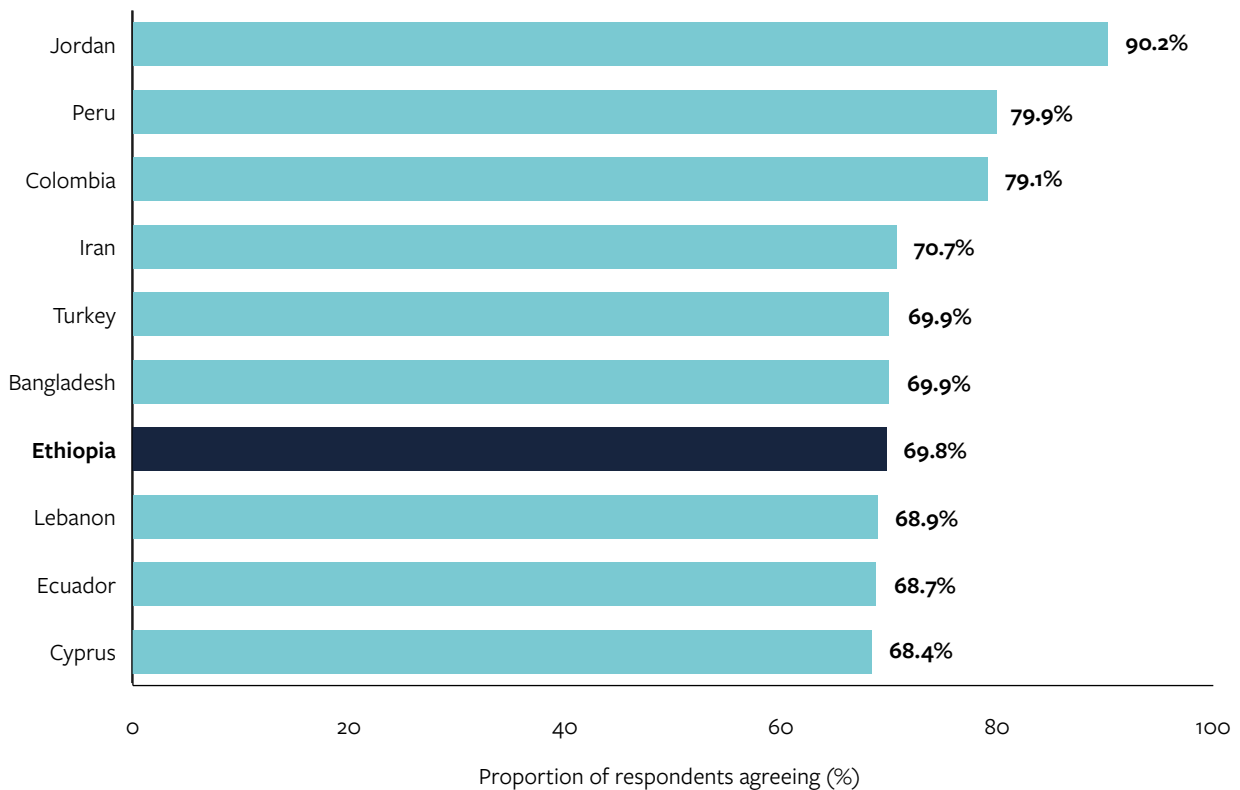
Note: This figure shows the 10 countries (out of 51 surveyed) with the highest proportion agreeing with the following statement: 'From your point of view, what have been the effects of immigrants on the development of [country X]?' [Increases unemployment]. The data was collected during Wave 7 of the World Values survey, which spanned from 2017 to 2020.
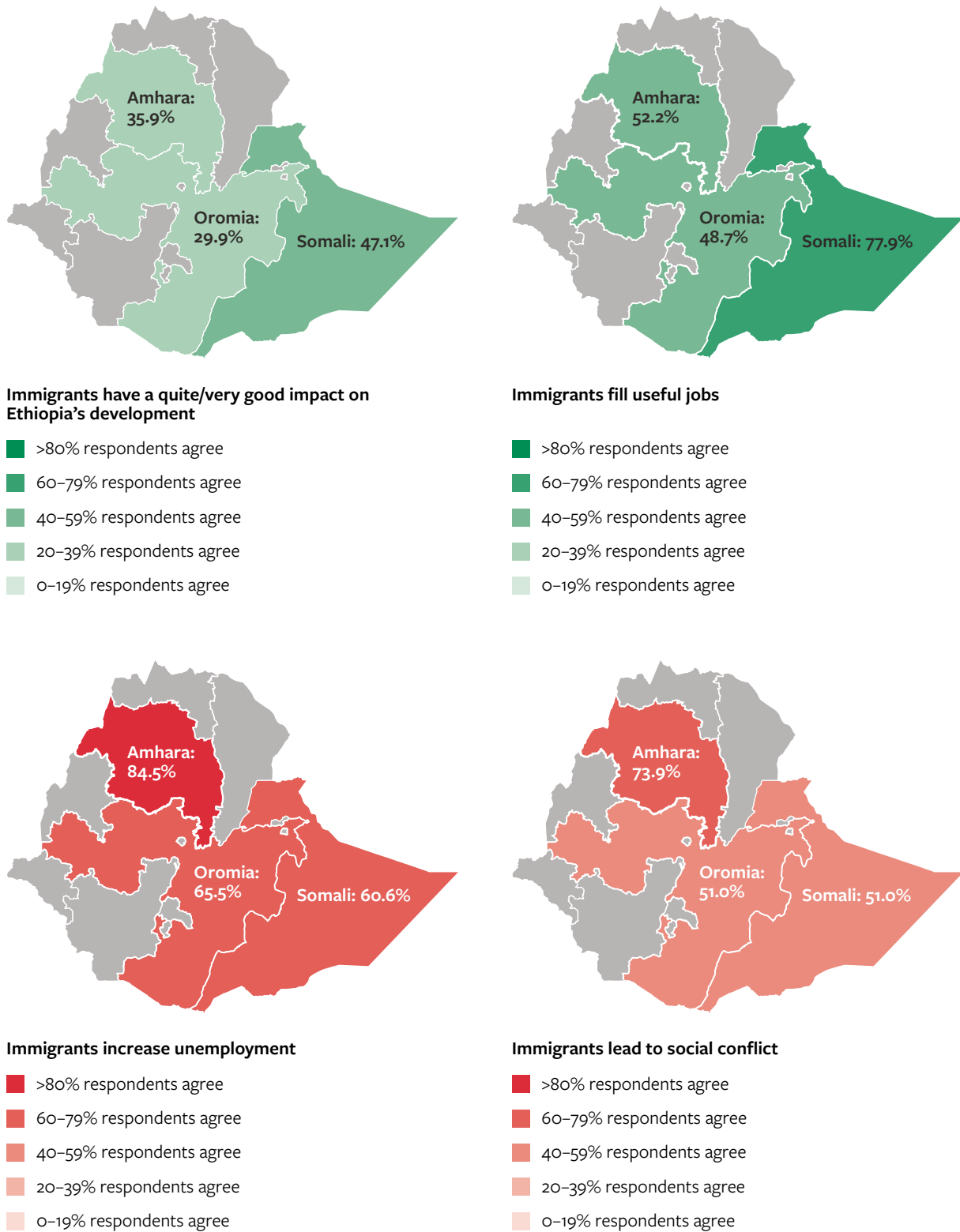Source: World Values Survey, 2020

World Values Survey data also suggests significant diversity in views between different demographic groups. Contrary to trends documented in high-income countries (Dempster et al., 2020) – though not unusual compared to other low- and middle-income nations (Facchini et al., 2012; Hargrave, 2021) – older Ethiopians (aged over 50) and those with the lowest levels of education were more positive, being less likely to support restrictive immigration policies, and the most positive overall in terms of development impacts (World Values Survey, 2020). Across different age groups, those aged 30 to 49 displayed the greatest support for immigration restrictions.

Diverse opinions were also seen between different ethnic groups and across geographic regions of the country. For example, Figure 8, comparing attitudes in three regions of Ethiopia, shows markedly positive attitudes in Somali region, where almost half (47%) of those surveyed felt that immigrants had a positive impact on the country's development, and more than three-quarters agreed that immigrants had filled useful jobs in the economy. In comparison, perceptions of positive impacts were less common in the highland regions of Oromia and Amhara, with concerns around unemployment and social conflict particularly stark in the latter.

Figure 8   Comparing attitudes in three regions of Ethiopia (2020)

Immigrants have a quite/very good impact on Ethiopia's development

- ■ >80% respondents agree
- ■ 60–79% respondents agree
- ■ 40–59% respondents agree
- ■ 20–39% respondents agree
- ■ 0–19% respondents agree

Immigrants fill useful jobs

- ■ >80% respondents agree
- ■ 60–79% respondents agree
- ■ 40–59% respondents agree
- ■ 20–39% respondents agree
- ■ 0–19% respondents agree

Immigrants increase unemployment

- ■ >80% respondents agree
- ■ 60–79% respondents agree
- ■ 40–59% respondents agree
- ■ 20–39% respondents agree
- ■ 0–19% respondents agree

Immigrants lead to social conflict

- ■ >80% respondents agree
- ■ 60–79% respondents agree
- ■ 40–59% respondents agree
- ■ 20–39% respondents agree
- ■ 0–19% respondents agree

Note: This figure compares attitudes in the three regions of Ethiopia with the largest sample sizes as part of the World Values Surveys' most recent survey round. The World Values Survey sampled 261 individuals in Oromia, 245 in Amhara and 208 in Somali region.

Source: World Values Survey, 2020

5.2 Social dynamics in refugee-hosting areas

This wider national survey data can be supplemented with evidence from more geographically specific, often qualitative studies in refugee-hosting areas, exploring perceptions of refugees and social dynamics within communities. Such evidence points to broadly positive relationships in many refugee-hosting regions, with the notable exception of Gambella. One study by the World Bank in three refugee-hosting regions found that just 17% of refugees and 11% of host community members reported bad relationships between the two groups; Somali refugees were the most positive about relations, followed by Sudanese and Eritreans, with South Sudanese refugees significantly less so (Pape et al., 2018). Another study, covering five regions of the country, found that most refugees and local residents expressed a desire for stronger connections with one another, although – in line with the narratives elaborated in Section 4.1 – there were striking variations within and across regions (Carver, 2020).

Various studies have documented how shared cultural and ethnic ties between certain groups of refugees and their hosts have helped to foster positive relationships, often supported by longstanding social connections and intermarriage. Reflecting broader positive perceptions towards migrants elaborated above, this is particularly prominent in Somali region (Samuel Hall, 2018; 2020; Betts et al., 2019b; Carver et al., 2020a; Vemeru et al., 2020) – though divisions remain along clan lines. Similar dynamics around shared culture, particularly concerning Eritreans and Somalis, have also been noted in Afar (Feyissa and Mohamed, 2021), Tigray (RDPP, 2018; Ludi and Yohannes, 2020) and Addis Ababa (Mena, 2018; Betts et al., 2019a). Notably, however, evidence on social dynamics in Tigray predates the recent conflict.

Across different regions, positive relations also appear to be reinforced by repeated social interactions between groups, including through economic activities, religious practices, social and sporting events and shared services (Samuel Hall, 2018; Ludi and Yohannes, 2020; Vemeru et al., 2020). In particular, numerous studies have focused on economic interactions between refugees and their hosts, spanning employment, trade and business partnerships (see Box 4). Efforts to support cohesion have often sought to build on such connections between communities, creating additional opportunities for refugees and local populations to come into contact (see Box 7).

Box 7   In focus: promoting social cohesion between refugees and host communities

Social cohesion between refugees and host communities has long been a key consideration for actors involved in Ethiopia's refugee response. Many initiatives have sought to support cohesion between communities by strengthening existing contact and shared interactions between refugees and host communities. In some cases, this has been part of programmes directly focused social cohesion. In others, this has been integrated as a programmatic principle within initiatives focused on other sectors. Such activities reflect long-standing attitudinal research regarding 'contact theory'; namely, that contact between communities, if based on meaningful interactions, can lead to reduced prejudice and more positive perceptions.

For example, in Gambella region, **Unity**, a social organisation formed by Nuer refugees and host community members, has organised cultural celebrations for Nuer individuals from both communities, aiming to support cohesion. **UNHCR** has organised sports tournaments in Somali region and Beninshangul-Gumuz to bring communities together. **GIZ's** QEP programme has supported the development of Ethiopia's first integrated public vocational school, Nefas Silk Polytechnic College in Addis Ababa, bringing together students from host and refugee communities.

In Dollo Ado, Somali region, **IKEA Foundation** investments have supported the establishment of cooperatives in sectors including agriculture, livestock and energy provision, bringing together refugees and host community members as part of membership-based income generating groups. An evaluation of the programme noted that, among other impacts, the model had contributed to social cohesion between refugees and local communities, while also noting ongoing challenges in terms of power relations within cooperatives.

In other cases, programmes have sought to promote social cohesion by seeking to mitigate impacts of refugee-hosting experienced by local communities. The World Bank's **Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project (DRDIP)**, undertaken with the Ministry of Agriculture across five regions, has sought to address a range of challenges impacting hosting communities. The project uses a community-driven development model, including interventions across multiple sectors. Areas targeted include management of environmental and natural resources, basic social services and economic infrastructure.

Sources: Ministry of Agriculture, 2016; Betts et al., 2019b; Nigusie and Carver, 2019; Dempster et al., 2020; GIZ, 2020; UNHCR, 2020b; Vemeru et al., 2020

Despite broadly positive relations, there are sporadic instances of tensions, discrimination and localised insecurity between groups across all refugee-hosting regions. These are often linked to access to natural resources – in particular land and firewood – and in Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella are exacerbated by constrained refugee livelihoods (Samuel Hall, 2018; Carver, 2020; Vemeru et al., 2020). They also often intersect with broader ethnic discrimination and conflict. For example, studies have documented discrimination experienced by Somali- and Tigrinya-speaking individuals in Addis Ababa – whether refugees or local residents – based on their ethnicity (Vemeru et al., 2020), with media reports suggesting increasing challenges for the latter group in the context of the conflict in Tigray (The New Humanitarian, 2020).

Tensions between communities have proved particularly severe only in Gambella region, linked to its complex history and narratives concerning refugee-hosting. This is particularly the case in terms of concerns regarding how the ethnic balance of the region has shifted over time as a result of refugee arrivals, exacerbating long-standing tensions between Nuer and Anuak communities (discussed in Chapter 2 and Section 4.1). In several cases underlying tensions have sparked significant violence between refugees and hosts (Samuel Hall, 2018; Carver et al., 2020b).

Finally, analysts have observed possible risks in terms social dynamics associated with future reforms to Ethiopia's refugee response, particularly with regard to refugees' rights to work and freedom of movement (Carver, 2020; Vemeru et al., 2020). While by no means negating the arguments for these reforms, which have been well-documented, the existing policy environment appears to be associated with a delicate, and largely positive, balance in terms of social dynamics. As with any significant policy shifts, ongoing monitoring of their implications for social dynamics will be critical as and when reforms unfold, in order to ensure their sustainability and avoid exacerbating tensions within communities.

6 Recommendations

There are various entry points for actors seeking to engage with narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants in Ethiopia, from government at all levels, civil society, the media and the private sector to regional and international organisations. This study offers the following recommendations to actors already engaging, or interested in engaging, in this space:

Recommendation 1: Invest in in-depth research exploring attitudes towards refugees

While various surveys provide insights in terms of broader attitudes towards immigrants and foreign workers in Ethiopia, national polling has not specifically explored attitudes towards refugees. This represents a notable gap given the size of Ethiopia's refugee population and ongoing discussions around policy reforms. Investment in targeted polling could help inform the framing and direction of future reforms, including relating to the CRRF, while providing a deeper understanding of opinions among the Ethiopian public. Given the complexity of these issues in Ethiopia, and their connection to sensitive issues including ethnic identity and conflict, this is likely to be most effective as part of mixed method approaches, for example through attitudinal segmentation.[6] Such efforts should prioritise:

- **Nationally representative polling exploring public opinion around key elements of attitudes and possible future reforms**; for example, in relation to rights to work and expansion of the OCP.
- **Regionally specific studies**, seeking to understand the diversity of these opinions between refugee-hosting regions and locally specific risks and areas of opportunity.
- **Consistent research over time to understand shifts in dynamics**; for example, seeking to understand implications of the Tigray crisis in terms of public opinion and potential implications for the country's refugee response.

Recommendation 2: Address negative attitudes and tensions, drawing on existing evidence and good practice

Despite gaps, existing evidence suggests priority areas for intervention; both in terms of fostering positive perceptions of refugees and other migrants throughout the country, and to support social cohesion in refugee-hosting areas. Interventions should address specific areas of tension highlighted in existing research and draw on relevant good practice:[7]

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6 Attitudinal segmentation is an approach to public opinion research, increasingly utilised across high-income contexts, usually combining quantitative surveys with qualitative elements. It explores how attitudes towards refugees and other migrants are distributed across different segments of the public, and how these interact with broader opinions and values (see Dempster et al., 2020).

7 For an overview of relevant good practice see Dempster and Hargrave, 2017; Dempster et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2021.

- **Ensuring that initiatives are adapted to local contexts**; for example, prioritising efforts to support social cohesion and conflict sensitivity in Gambella's refugee response, in light of a particularly challenging context and intragroup dynamics.
- **Prioritising humanitarian and development investments that address wider issues exacerbating negative perceptions and social conflict**; for example, in relation to unemployment, access to firewood and environmental degradation, as well as broader issues surrounding ethnic identity and conflict.
- **Exploring targeted outreach within groups where negative perceptions appear particularly common**, for example, in terms of attitudes towards immigration among younger Ethiopians (particularly those aged 30–49) and more highly educated groups.
- **Working with trusted messengers in terms of national and local outreach**, for example religious and traditional leaders.
- **Undertaking projects aiming to strengthen social contact and promote social cohesion between refugees and hosts**, building on and evaluating good practice from existing initiatives.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen dialogue around Ethiopia's refugee response

Recent years have seen significant shifts in the policy environment surrounding refugee-hosting in Ethiopia, alongside wider instability and conflict. The policy reform process would be strengthened by efforts to engage new stakeholders, particularly those at local levels, in discussions surrounding its future direction, informed by a more substantive discussion of the place of refugees and other migrants within the country and in local communities. This could provide opportunities to ensure that commitments at international and federal levels are more proactively communicated and discussed at local levels. It would also provide space for local and federal-level stakeholders to come together to discuss the future direction of policy developments and how these are communicated at different levels, ensuring greater coherence between approaches.

Such dialogue could be informed by in-depth research as suggested above, seeking to better understand the views of local communities towards refugees, as well as additional efforts focused on understanding the perspectives of refugees and other migrants themselves. This should also be connected to, and reflected within, future initiatives seeking to address the country's ongoing conflict and pursue dialogue in relation to contested notions of national identity. This is critical, both in view of the close relationship between local communities' perspectives of refugees and wider questions of national identity, and in order to ensure the relevance of dialogue surrounding Ethiopia's refugee response to fast-evolving shifts in the broader political context.

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