



# Migration and development dynamics in Kombolcha, Ethiopia

Industrial growth and international investment led to rapid urbanisation in Kombolcha, yet there are few good jobs. Migration abroad for livelihood opportunities is common, though most would prefer to stay in Ethiopia.

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Rural-urban in-migration is on the rise, some 40% of young adults living in Kombolcha are internal migrants.

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There are clear gender patterns for out-migration. International out-migration has been prominent among young women, who move to Gulf countries for paid domestic work.

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The majority of young adults (80%) expect to stay in Kombolcha over the next five years, around one quarter (24%) would prefer to leave.



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Photo: Camille Kasavan for MIGNEX.

Kombolcha is a rapidly growing town in the Amhara Region of Central-North Ethiopia. The town has long been an area for manufacturing, home to some of the oldest Ethiopian-owned textile and bottling factories, as well as an older Chinese-owned textile factory. Kombolcha Industrial Park, built in 2017, accommodates nine factories, four of which are foreign-owned.

This has led to rapid urban growth amid rural-urban in-migration - some 40% of surveyed young adults grew up elsewhere in Ethiopia. There has also been further

infrastructure development – including a new airport and a forthcoming railway line towards Djibouti.

Despite this, most young adults (81%) surveyed for this MIGNEX case study consider it difficult to earn a living and feed their family. While the industrial park has provided new jobs, wages are low and conditions poor. One in five surveyed young adults (23%) are unemployed and almost half (49%) consider it difficult to find a good job.

This case study brief is based on fieldwork and survey data in June 2021. At that time, many young adults noted that Kombolcha remained safe despite political insecurity and instances of violence occurring elsewhere in Ethiopia. Soon after, in July 2021, fighting began in Afar, around 200 km from Kombolcha. Tigray forces later took control of major towns in the South Wollo Zone, Amhara region, between October – December 2021. This conflict has since had a significant impact on livelihoods, infrastructure, and mobility in Kombolcha, and the wider region.<sup>2</sup>

The MIGNEX team also conducted research in Batu and Moyale, and carried out a review of migration-relevant policies in Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup>

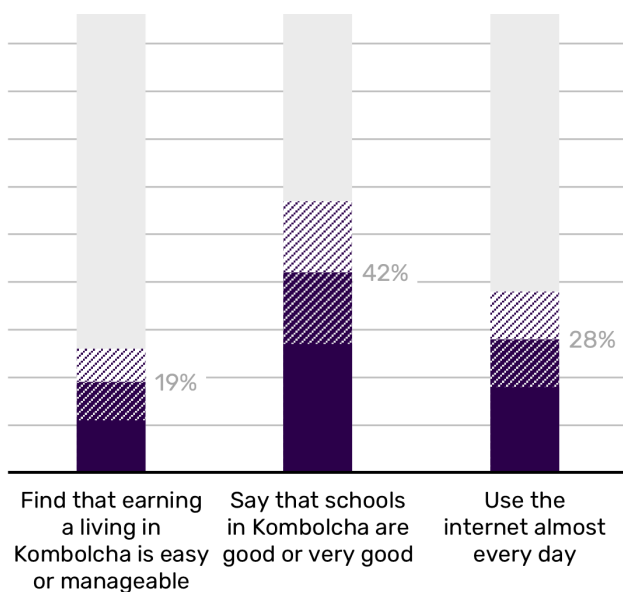
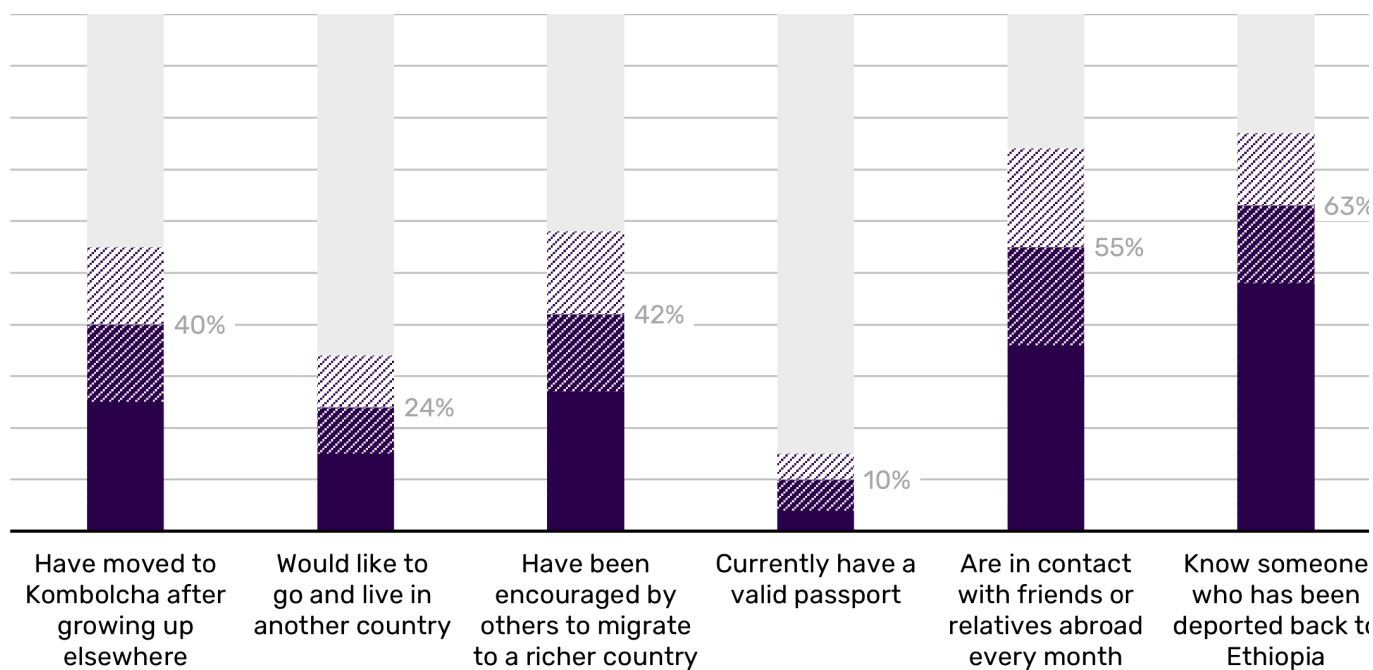


Figure 1. Indicators of development

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

### Migration from Kombolcha

The Dessie area of Ethiopia, which includes Kombolcha, is one of the country’s biggest hotspots for out-migration. Over two-thirds



**Figure 2. Indicators of migration dynamics**

Source: MIGNEX survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

(68%) of surveyed young adults have family and friends living abroad, predominantly in Saudi Arabia (54%), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (25%) and the United States (20%).

These destinations have largely remained the same over the past 20 years, yet the dynamics of migration to Gulf countries has shifted. In recent years, Ethiopia has signed bilateral agreements on labour migration with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, which have facilitated pathways for legal migration to these countries. However, irregular migration is still common, often because it offers the potential for higher earnings.

International out-migration is most common among women seeking domestic work in Gulf countries, who do so through both regular and irregular pathways.

### Migration aspirations

Despite the prominence of international out-migration, attitudes towards it are mixed – tending towards the negative. This is particularly true regarding the migration of women to Gulf countries. While many young adults highlighted that it as an effective means to save money, support family and gain independence, overall women’s out-migration

to Gulf countries is viewed as a last resort, if there are no other options at home.

Overall, young adults were optimistic about the future in Kombolcha, and some were hopeful for improvements due to several infrastructure and development projects across the area. However, recent political instability and conflict has impacted the atmosphere and feelings of security.

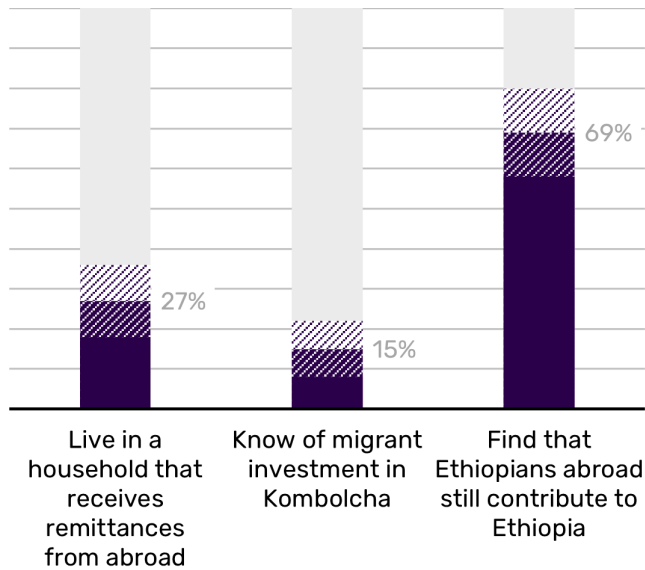
Almost one quarter (24%) of surveyed young adults would prefer to leave Ethiopia in the next five years.

### Gender and migration

A prominent form of international out-migration is among young women, who move to Gulf countries for paid domestic work. While current international migrants were not included in the survey, past migration experience was captured - 13% of young women had lived abroad for at least one year, compared to 11% of young men.

*Migration taught me to be responsible, sacrifice, and think about my family. It gave me the resolve that my children would not experience migration.*

Focus group participant



**Figure 3. Migration–development interactions**

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

Although regular migration channels are available, women often revert to irregular pathways and smugglers, taking dangerous routes through Djibouti and Yemen to Saudi Arabia. Reasons for this include the training and education requirements for legal pathways, lower rates of pay and less flexibility at work when migrating regularly. Young women highlighted the challenges of employment in Gulf countries, through both regular and irregular pathways, including long hours and abuse.

Some men also choose to migrate internationally – often along a southern route to Kenya for employment – but internal migration is more common. Young men often migrate to the Afar region, or to bigger cities such as nearby Dessie or the capital of Addis Ababa. Half (50%) of surveyed young adults

know of someone from Kombolcha who has migrated internally in the past five years.

### Links between migration and development

Transnational ties are strong in Kombolcha. The majority (83%) of surveyed young adults have been in contact with migrant family or friends abroad in the past year. Migrants commonly send remittances back to their families, which is one of the primary reasons for migration. Over one-third (39%) of young adults reported that their household had received remittances in the past year.

Collective remittances are uncommon, only one case was highlighted: a local organisation 'Arhibu Charitable Association' works on migration issues and offers wider support for vulnerable families. It is funded by internal and international migrants, which suggests that ties remain strong with the diaspora.

### Notes

1. A month after MIGNEX Fieldwork in June 2021, tensions and security concerns rose significantly. The Tigray army started fighting in Afar and the Ethiopian government issued a call for all Amhara armed citizens to join the army. On 2 November 2021, Ethiopia declared a nationwide state of emergency as Tigray forces took control of major towns in the South Wollo Zone, Amhara region, including Dessie and Kombolcha. See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/2/ethiopia-declares-nationwide-state-of-emergency>
2. Fieldwork consisting of key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observations was carried out by Camille Kasavan in June 2021. A face-to-face survey of 500 randomly selected residents (aged 18–39 years) was conducted by Samuel Hall, July 2021.

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MIGNEX – Aligning Migration Management and the Migration–Development Nexus – is a five-year research project (2018–2023) with the core ambition of creating new knowledge on migration, development and policy. It is carried out by a consortium of nine partners: The Peace Research Institute Oslo (coordinator), Danube University Krems, the University of Ghana, Koç University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Maastricht University, ODI, the University of Oxford and Samuel Hall.

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