# Aze Debo’a site-specific topic: migration to South Africa

The purpose of this study is to outline the overall situation of migration from the community and the impacts it has on the community, focusing on particular cases of migration to South Africa.

The information for this study was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) held with informants returned from South Africa and heads of households whose family members and relatives are living in South Africa.

## Genesis of Kembatas’ migration to South Africa

There is no clearly documented information regarding the migration of Ethiopians to South Africa before and during the era of Apartheid. According to the information obtained from the returnees from South Africa, the first migration to South Africa was started after the collapse of the Apartheid regime in 1994. As they further argued, inhabitants of Addis Ababa have been the first ones to migrate to South Africa following the independence of the country from the Apartheid regime. In 1995, two youths named Erago from Kembata and Habtamu from Hadiya migrated to South Africa along with other youths from Addis Ababa. Shortly after their arrival in South Africa, they wrote letters and made phone calls to youths of their relatives that there is better access for job seekers in South Africa. Currently, these two individuals are millionaires, having mega shops in Pretoria and other cities of South Africa, and have been granted the documents of citizenship.

Then, some high school graduates and other youths lacking access to jobs started to migrate to South Africa. Gradually after some years, this information reached the ear of many inhabitants of Kembata and Hadiya, and a huge number of youths started to move to South Africa, and the number of people going to South Africa reached the highest peak starting from 2000. Since then, a large number of youths migrated to South Africa through different directions.

According to the information we obtained from the participants of in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions, population pressure, poverty, high unemployment rates and lack of livelihood options have been the major causes for international migration from the study area to South Africa. So far, only males migrate to South Africa for work, while females travel to South Africa for marriage purposes except a very few who moved for jobs. One of the informants stated the existing situation in Aze Debo’a as follows:

*During the last couple of years, there was a granting of job opportunities to graduates of higher institutions. Since the last two years, however, there is no access to jobs for many graduates in the area. Then what is expected from the young generation unless they leave the country to look for jobs in South Africa? This situation adversely affected even the teaching and learning process and became the cause of migration of young people who would have done well at school.*

Apart from this, different groups of people migrate from the study area to South Africa; mainly unemployed youth, followed closely by high school and college graduates. Since the last few years in particular, even civil servants have started to move to South Africa due to dissatisfaction in their jobs, salary scale and overall politics of the existing government.

All informants unanimously declared that the process of migration is facilitated in different ways. On the one hand, some migrants travel to South Africa in a legal way by obtaining visas directly from the South African Embassy in Ethiopia as tourists, businessmen and as patients seeking health treatment in South Africa. Others travel to Nairobi and obtain their visas from the South African Embassy in Kenya being assisted by brokers in Kenya.

As the returnees from South Africa confirmed, there is an organized chain of brokers in different countries who have links with people working in embassies of different countries starting from Ethiopia up to Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho, Swaziland, Namibia, Botswana and many others. In most cases, migrants obtain visas from embassies by paying additional money that would be shared among brokers and people working in embassies. Currently, migrants pay up to 100 thousand birr to brokers to obtain a visa from the South African embassies to Ethiopia and Kenya.

On the other hand, migrants who could not afford to pay 100 thousand birr travel to South Africa on foot or by taking a public transport from Ethiopia to Kenya by crossing the border at towns like Moyale and Omoratea on the way to Lake Turkana. Then, they move to Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique, and South Africa. For such kind of travel, migrants are charged up to 35 thousand Birr.

In general, most of the migrants from this area move without calculating the risks they would face on their way to this destination. For instance, a large number of migrants are exposed to detention and imprisonment in different countries like Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia and others, while others were killed by armed robbers on their way to South Africa. Some of them were eaten by wild animals when they were crossing the jungles late at night. There are also many young people whose whereabouts is not yet known, and who were exposed to various problems, while they were attempting to cross the neighbouring countries illegally. In this connection, one of the youths who was detained in Tanzania stated his case as follows:

*I am single and 18 years old. My father is a teacher in Aze Debo’a Primary School for the last 20 years. He used to encourage me to be successful in my education and to continue my studies up to university. Unfortunately, my ambition of joining the university became only a dream after I failed in matriculation exam of grade 10 in 2010. Thereafter, I started nagging my father to send me in the way other parents are sending their children to South Africa because I know that he has a saving account in Durame Bank, and he was saving some part of his salary on a monthly basis.*

*After two weeks, my father agreed to cover the cost of my travel to South Africa. Accordingly, he gave me pocket money of 5000 birr and paid 28 thousand birr to a broker to take me to South Africa. Then I went to Addis Ababa and changed my money into US Dollars at the exchange rate of 1:16 birr on the black market. Finally, I and other four youths from Durame area made our journey in the southern direction by public transport on 25 July 2002 EC, and arrived at Moyale town, which is on the border of Ethiopia and Kenya.*

*The next day, we became 90 in number after we met with 85 youths who waited for us in Moyale town and we went to the port of Mombasa together, being led by the broker from Kenya. After staying one day in Mombasa, another broker from Tanzania took us in the direction of Zanzibar by boat. Roughly after ten hours travel, we reached the shore of Zanzibar. Then, the broker told us that he needed up to 500 dollar from each of us to bribe the security people in Zanzibar and in other places on our way to South Africa. Accordingly, we handed over all our money to him including every penny in our pockets, but he disappeared on the beach of Zanzibar. After staying about three hours on the boat on the shore of Zanzibar, we were captured by the police and detained at the police station in Zanzibar for four days.*

*Then, we were taken by the police to the court in Dar-es-Salaam and accused of travelling to Tanzania without a visa. We responded in group that we had been cheated and brought to Tanzania by brokers and asked to be excused for entering the country illegally. However, we were imprisoned for one year and six months in Dar-es-Salaam without any legal decision. Thanks to the International Red Cross were released and returned to Addis Ababa in November 2011 by its support of arranging airplane and covering the cost of our air tickets. During our stay in the prison of Tanzania, we were starved and mistreated many times and handled inhumanely.*

On the other hand, a large number of migrants are exposed to dangerous circumstances such as robbery, murder and other problems on their way to South Africa. When migrants die in that country, their bodies are repatriated back to Ethiopia for burial in their home areas. In relation to this, we attended the funeral of a youth who was murdered by armed robbers in South Africa during our first travel to fieldwork. The returnees from South Africa underlined that most of the migrants are not fully integrated into the life and people of South Africa even if most of them lived for several years in the country because of experiencing xenophobia and discrimination on a daily basis. As a result, most of the migrants want to return to their home country, and still maintain close contacts with their parents and relatives in home areas through a variety of ways. Some of them maintain their relationship by making phone calls, while others maintain their contact by sending remittances to their families.

Furthermore, most of the migrants never stay until they save a large amount of money; rather they immediately transfer whatever they obtain as profit outside their running capital to their family members in Ethiopia mainly fearing the possibility of being exposed to robbery and murder. Secondly, they do not have the right to open a bank account in their names in South Africa except a very few individuals who acquire South African identity documents. Those who have obtained a citizenship entitlement can travel back and forth between Ethiopia and South Africa.

One of the returnees who travelled to South Africa shared his experience as follows:

*I completed grade 12 from Durame High School in 2001, but I stayed five years at home without having any job. Accordingly, I told my desire going to South Africa to my parents and insisted they give me some money for my travel the same as other parents are doing for their children. Then, they accepted my idea and sold their two oxen and all woodlots of eucalyptus in our land for 23 thousand birr. Then, they gave me all the money and I changed some of the money to US Dollar with the exchange rate of one to nine birr in the black market by going to Addis Ababa. After a week from my return from Addis Ababa, I paid 14 thousand birr to a person having a relationship with a broker in Durame town.*

*After some days, I and nine other high school graduates from Kembata area started our journey to South Africa in November 2006 GC. by taking public transport up to the border town of Moyale, being led by a broker. The next day, we crossed the border to Kenya on foot and reached the city of Nairobi by renting a minibus and travelling at night. We stayed two weeks in a compound of a given house in the periphery of Nairobi without moving anywhere else. Then, the broker who brought us from our home area handed us over to another broker in Kenya, and we travelled to the border of Tanzania at night in another minibus. Thereafter, he handed us over to another broker living in Tanzania, and he managed to take us to Dar-es-Salaam without any problem.*

*After staying two weeks in Dar-es-Salaam, we travelled to Malawi at night and arrived in the city Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, at 5 am in a minibus rented for this purpose. The following day, we were handed over to another broker in Malawi, and we passed two nights in his house. The third day, we travelled at about 8 pm in the evening and managed to arrive in Maputo (the capital of Mozambique) before dawn. The same day in late afternoon, another broker managed to take us to South Africa by giving a bribe to security officers on the border.*

*On that day, we passed the night in the house of the broker in South Africa. The next day, he took us to Pretoria, the capital of South Africa, and introduced us to individuals from Kembata who had stayed some years in the country. Then they divided us into four groups and two of us were taken to the house of a person from Durame, and we sheltered there until we got a job and earned some money.*

*The next day, he took us to the immigration office in Pretoria and we registered by paying 200 Rand each. After a week, the immigration office gave us an identity card that enabled us to stay in South Africa on a temporary basis and run some small businesses. Then he guided us how we start our business and lent us some money for buying some items for sale and pay him back in addition to the dollars we brought from our country. Then I and some of my friends started to sell curtains, blankets, bed sheets and mattresses until I returned to Ethiopia in June 2011, while others started to sell smaller items like wallets, cell phone cards and other items by moving from place to place.*

*After we stayed two months in the house of a person from Durame, I and three of my friends rented one living room by 500 Rand in the centre of Pretoria. After a year, I and my friends became successful in our business and able to earn more than 100 thousand Rand each. One day, I and my friend returned from our job at 5 o’clock in the afternoon and got rest in our bed without closing the door of our room.*

*Shortly after we reached our room, one of the robbers entered into our room and shouted to put up our hands by intimidating us with a pistol in his hand. Then, the other robbers got into the room and tied our hands, legs and mouth with ropes after putting pieces of cloth in our mouths. Thereafter, they searched every item in our room, and took all our money because they knew that we did not have permission to open a book and save our money in the Bank. Roughly two hours later, we were able to be released from being tied up by one of our friends who visited our room to chat with us. We reported the case to the police, but nothing has been done.*

*The next day we moved to another location near to the police station in the same town, and we started our job again after three days with the assistance of Diasporas from Kembata in South Africa. After that I did not face any problem even though robbery and murder are the day to day phenomena in South Africa. In relation to this, dozens of Ethiopians were horribly murdered by robbers because of hesitating to hand over all their money and property as soon as they are requested.*

*Thanks to God, I peacefully returned to my country after I saved 1.4 million birr without including the money I sent to my parents at different times during my stay in South Africa. For instance, I sent about 25 thousand birr to my parents a month before we were robbed of our money and 30 thousand birr in 2008. Currently, I purchased my own living house and started to construct a big hotel in Durame too. In addition, I have an Isuzu vehicle transporting goods from place to place, and earning me a minimum of 10 thousand birr in a month.*

On top of that, the father of a successful migrant stated his change in life as follows:

*After I heard the information that those who migrated to South Africa are gaining lucrative income in a short period of time and assisting their families, I decided to send my older son to South Africa. Accordingly, I covered the cost of his travel by investing all my savings and by selling all my valuable property and livestock, including my farm oxen and milk cows. Then, he went to Addis Ababa and obtained his passport from the Immigration Office within three days. Thereafter, I gave his passport and 30 thousand birr to a broker who had close contact with people in the South African embassy in Ethiopia. The second day, he obtained a visa from the South African Embassy and he managed to make a direct flight to South Africa in February 2005.*

*The next day, he passed the message through a line phone of my brother in Durame town that he had arrived safely in South Africa and he met with many Ethiopians. Subsequently, he made his second call after a week and informed that he started the job of selling different cloths as a mobile vendor. In relation to this, the first six months of 2005 were very difficult for my family and we could not celebrate Easter in the same way as it had been before because we did not have any money during that time. We were even exposed to food shortage until we got the first remittance of 15 thousand birr at the end of August 2005. With this money, I immediately purchased two oxen and a milking cow, and we were able to celebrate Meskel in a good way.*

*In October 2007, he covered the cost of air ticket and all expenses of my second son, and took him to South Africa. Currently, they give me a phone call at least once in a month and we usually obtain remittances from both our children. I purchased a living house in Durame town and rented it to an NGO staff for 1000 birr per month. Similarly, the family members of migrants in our kebele are investing the remittances in productive activities that have multiplier effects such as building nice houses, shops, hotels and other businesses among other things.*

*Besides that, I am doing a business of buying oxen at a cheaper price from markets and selling them back for a better price after fattening them for three months. Furthermore, we are eating more nutritious food stuffs than before because we can afford it. Nowadays, life is a big challenge for many households who have no access to remittances or other income sources in addition to their farm products, because most of the households in the kebele cannot produce enough production due to shortage of land.*

With regard to the jobs of migrants in South Africa, they mostly sell curtains, blankets, bed sheets, mattresses, pillowcases and other cloths. They are also assisted and guided by the relatives or friends of the migrants who have stayed some years in the country. Furthermore, those who stayed South Africa lend them money to buy some items for sale and pay them back. In general, family members expect remittances from migrants in South Africa. Failure to send remittances back home often leads to the straining of relations between the migrants and their family members back home.

The information obtained from the returnees indicated that most of the migrants are successful in their jobs except a very few who are not hard workers; and those who have been repetitively robbed of their money by gangsters. Migrants who faced such problems could not send remittances to their families. Nevertheless, their families in the home country may not understand why their children are not sending remittances because of the general perception among many people in the community that there are unlimited job opportunities in South Africa.