Youth Perspectives on Migration, Poverty and the Precarious Future of Farming in Rural Ethiopia

Siera Vercillo, SEED with Logan Cochrane, Carleton University for New Directions Workshop

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Youth Migration and Farming

Push Factors

- Erratic rainfall
- Poor soil
- Volatile market prices
- Declining land sizes
- Population growth

(Prahmato, 2007; Cochrane et al., 2019)

Pull Factors

- Availability of education and other services
- Better paying and higher status jobs

Neoliberalism and trade globalization benefit urban areas leads to increased migration (Bernstein, 2010)
Youth Migration and Farming in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has lower urban population (below 20%)

Urbanization – 3.8% to 5.4% (triple over next 20 years)

Smallholder farmers make up 90% - most are rain fed

Although 8% to 12% annual GDP growth, malnutrition and chronic poverty has been highest in rural areas for over a decade
Our Study

Migration literature tends to focus on push factors, not decisions made by youth

Development discourse tends to focus on pull factors, blaming young people (Sumberg and Okali, 2013)

Goal – To understand how gender, class, location and age help to explain why youth migrate out and migration impacts on farming livelihoods and access to food in a rural area of southern Ethiopia.
Methodology – Participatory Mixed Research

- Focus groups that informed the,
- Household Survey ($N=450$) and,
- Interviews

Emphasize perspectives of different people
- Skilled / unskilled; Young / old; Male / female

Comparison of different rural communities:
A) Near a town B) Remote area C) with Irrigation
Case Study Context

Wolaita Zone, Southern Nations, Nationalities and People’s Region
Findings – Types of Migration

One quarter to one half of households have someone who has migrated

Low wage, unskilled
- Construction (Male)
- Plantation (Male)
- Domestic work (Female)
- Food Service (Female)

Skilled, often permanent
- Government
- Teaching
- Health care
MIGRATION FACTORS

Climate change
Volatile rainfall
Low yields

Short term, unskilled migration

Declining land size
Food insecurity
Poverty

Long term, unskilled migration

Infrastructure and service availability
Financial security
Complete education

Long term, skilled migration
### FINDINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Village - Remote</th>
<th>Village – Near Town</th>
<th>Village – Irrigation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of HH with one or more migrants</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of migrants going for skilled labor</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% able to afford to send all children to school</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months of Food Insecurity</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% selling to the market</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>90%</td>
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Youth Perspectives on Migration, Poverty and Farming
Findings - Main Factors

Those with **food insecurity** strongly correlated with having more unskilled migrants ($r = 0.84$)

Those with food insecurity was weakly and negatively correlated ($r=-0.13$) with skilled migrants

**Land shortage**

- Households had only 0.25ha on average but need 0.5ha

**Gender Differences**

- Women/girls particularly excluded as make up only 3% of land holders & only 6% bequeathing to daughters  
  (Bezu and Holden, 2014)
Findings - Noteworthy

Where there are viable agricultural livelihoods there is less unskilled migration. Greater proportion of skilled migration is due to investment in education
Findings – Life After Migration

Youth who migrate for unskilled labour struggle to meet sufficient basic daily needs.

Poverty and Hunger

- 26 year old female migrant complained of low pay and that employers “force them to work more hours”

Gender Differences

- Male youth survive through inconsistent, short term work
- Female youth has more regular positions
Discussion – Impact on Rural Life

Youth migration places additional burden upon the elderly to care for children and the farm.

Elders left behind:

- “The elders do not have the capacity to work”
- “We do not know what the future will be...we miss their labor [because] it affects our yield.”

Youth who left:

- “Us leaving reduced some burden from them because there are less mouths to feed”
Conclusion

Unskilled migration is not because youth do not want to farm
Choice to leave is a family decision: land and food access
- not all rural areas are the same
Gendered and skills-based differences of migrants
- not all youth are the same

Forced migration- choice stems from both challenges of farming that do not lead to basic food security or surplus

Recommendation—start with rural livelihood development
Thank you – Any Questions?

Siera Vercillo, Postdoctoral Fellow, SEED, University of Waterloo, siera.vercillo@uwaterloo.ca

Logan Cochrane, Assistant Professor, Global and International Studies at Carleton University, Adjunct Professor at Hawassa University, logan.cochrane@gmail.com

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