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# Why migration will continue: aspirations and capabilities of Syrians and Ethiopians with different educational backgrounds

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**ABSTRACT**
This paper presents the argument that the so-called migration crisis that started in the summer of 2015 was not an unexpected sudden phenomenon, and that it is likely to continue in the future. Following the framework of aspirations and capabilities that Hein de Haas' work suggested, we will investigate migration motives looking at migration from Syria and Ethiopia. While the problems in Syria continue, countries around Syria are overloaded with refugees without sustainable opportunities. The migration from Africa is bound to persist, due to population pressure, poverty but also changing aspirations related to development. Based on meetings with Syrians and Ethiopians, we will show that there is actually a continuum of limited possibilities for them to achieve the satisfactory life they aspire to. Adding education levels to our analysis improves insight into why different groups move. We conclude that the potential for migration is only increasing.

## Introduction: the 'crisis'

Strangely enough, the influx of large numbers of migrants across the Mediterranean Sea in the summer of 2015 took Europeans by surprise. While the war in Syria was being broadcast on the news every day, and it was obvious that living conditions in Syria had deteriorated, there was no awareness that the numbers of refugees in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan had grown to unmanageable proportions. It had also not been noticed that due to population pressure, poverty and political problems in countries like Eritrea, Somalia, Nigeria and other African countries a movement northwards towards

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Europe, but also eastwards towards the rich Arab states and southwards towards South Africa was increasing.

Until 2011, when Gadhafi's strong state was overthrown, the route to the Mediterranean coast across Libya was blocked. Then, the strong control of illegal contraband and weapons through the Sahara ended. Independent armed groups, including former parts of the army, opposition groupings and old nomadic networks, gained influence and increasingly got involved in trading humans.

The combination of desperation and the lack of legal immigration avenues to enter Europe has provoked a situation in which people can see no option other than spend a fortune to go to Europe. On 15 June 2015, François Crépeau, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, cited a Somali poet, saying: 'Nobody puts their kids on a boat, unless that is safer than the land' (as was reported on the UNRIC website on 18 June 2015). It remains really strange that even though the right to claim asylum is laid down in international law, one first has to enter European territory to be able to apply for asylum. Unsurprisingly, both around Syria and in Libya, groups have increasingly made profit in supporting illegal travel towards and across the Mediterranean coast and onwards, often abusing migrants on the journey. In this paper, we will analyse the motives of migrants to better understand why migration streams develop. We will take Syria as a prototypical country of refugee migration and Ethiopia as a prototypical case of poverty-related (economic) migration.

## Migration: capabilities and aspiration

The literature on migration motives correctly observed that the traditional theories mainly focus on the macro- and meso-level and not on personal decisions or the agency of potential migrants. We follow De Haas (2011), who suggests that analysing migration motives at the micro-level, focusing on the aspirations and capabilities to migrate, will provide a more complete insight. Consequently, we prefer the term 'mixed migration', instead of the difference between 'voluntary' and 'forced' migration (Crisp 2008; Castles and Miller 2009; Van Hear, Brubaker, and Bessa 2009; De Haas 2010; RMMS 2015).

In the two cases that we study here, we will look into *aspirations* and *capabilities*. With *aspirations* we mean the future perspective that one would like to realize to have a satisfactory life. *Capabilities* are determined by legal and financial possibilities. Is it possible to attain a passport or exit visa and at what cost? Is it possible to obtain an entry visa for the country of destination? Are travel tickets available, and how much are they? If there are no legal possibilities, then through which semi-legal or illegal methods can one reach the destination country?

De Haas (2011, 32) argues that the option of migration becomes more attractive when the development and income of a poor country like

Morocco or Ethiopia starts to increase. Firstly, this is because the aspirations of people change – they get more information about life in richer countries and see more examples of improved living standards. Secondly, it is because capabilities change, in the sense that it becomes possible to raise the sum necessary to travel abroad. Especially if there is a community of pioneers that have already gone abroad, providing information, potentially sponsoring families and providing a safe arrival, chain migration tends to develop.

Additionally, we argue that distinguishing between educational/class levels refines the analysis of aspirations and capabilities. A person without education is likely to aspire to more than a minimum income, while a young university graduate's aspirations might be directed towards freedom of expression. Furthermore, finances and information level might enhance the capability to migrate.

## Syria

On 1 January 2015, before the start of the large-scale crossings to Greece, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had registered 1.4 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon and 747,360 in Jordan, and there were 1.5 million refugees in Turkey according to the Turkish government (UNHCR 2015). In Lebanon, one out of five people was Syrian. These numbers have only increased after the further advance of IS, fighting between all involved groups and bombings by outside powers. The actual 'crisis' takes place in Syria. What is important for our analysis, however, is to describe why people who escaped from Syria to safer neighbouring countries, particularly the two largest refugee receivers Lebanon and Turkey, aspire to travel to Europe.

Half a year later, in summer 2015, Turkey already counted 1.6 million Syrians. Only 220,000 of them lived in the relatively well-equipped UN camps, while the rest live elsewhere, either with family, in regional camps or in the Turkish cities (Bartels and Visser 2015; Douw 2015). What is complicated for the Turkish government is that many of the refugees are from the Kurdish region of Syria, who the Turkish state associates with its enemy the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK, Kurdish Workers Party). Turkish law in 2015 stipulated that the Syrians did not receive UN refugee status, but instead temporary 'protection status'.[1] The camps are therefore referred to as temporary protection camps or guest camps (Özden 2013). Due to this 'guest' status, the refugees have no work permit or right for education for their children. Particularly in Dyarbakir, Istanbul and Izmir, there are high numbers of Syrians who are not in camps. Many work in the informal sector, and are prone to abuse, for instance, having to pay excessive rent.

The situation in Lebanon is worse than in Turkey. Firstly, this is because the large proportion of Syrians makes finding housing and employment extremely difficult, resulting in tensions with the local population. Secondly, since 2011, Syrians have lived in informal tent settlements that have been intentionally kept temporary because of the Lebanese government's experience of the seventy-year-old Palestinian camps. The available camps are overcrowded and the tents are cold in winter. The UNHCR supports only 18,000 families in camp-like-settlements, while 439,000 refugees live outside camps in deserted buildings, or expensive rooms rented in the crowded towns and cities (UNHCR 2016). Refugees have no access to a work permit or Lebanese citizenship. Worse still, there is not always enough food or medical care, as the UNHCR has not received all the promised donations from its members. Only very recently (end of 2015) were children admitted into local schools.

### Aspirations and capabilities of Syrians in Turkey and Lebanon

For the first year after the outbreak of the problems in 2011, refugees thought they could wait in the neighbouring countries for the conflict to end and then go back home. However, in the summer of 2015, with no end to the conflict in sight, people began to move across the Mediterranean and onwards through the Balkans. Any perspective of a normal life, with a permanent resident status, a legal job and the right for education was (and is) missing in both Turkey and Lebanon. As discussed above, the situation in Lebanon was more pressing, because there was a food shortage, lack of heating and not enough medical care in the camps. But even in Turkey, many stories show that while well-educated Syrian parents managed to find work, their children were out of school for years with no prospect of improvement. It is therefore not surprising that one of the first measures the EU asked Turkey to implement was to let refugee children go to school.

Of course, the minimum *aspirations* of most Syrians, regardless of their level of education, are basic, namely safety, enough food, shelter and medical care, but in the near future they also need the right to work, a real house and education for their children. In the long run, a form of citizenship is necessary.

The decision to stay in Turkey or Lebanon, or to travel onwards, depends mainly on financial and organizational *capabilities.* The first, which is the capability to gather information about possible options either online or through telephone contacts, is more present among higher educated individuals. The second is financial resources. Other options seemed blocked. Acquiring a student or work visa for a European country or the US/Canada is slow and difficult. Increased security prevents people flying to Europe or Russia with a false passport or somebody else's passport. So an illegal boat trip arranged by a smuggler, for instance, from the Izmir region to one of the nearby Greek islands, may be considered as the least risky (or only viable) option. Much

more money and organization is needed to acquire a visa to other countries, for instance, Russia, to fly to the Russian–Norwegian border and cross on a bicycle. Due to the evidently enormous desperation, those with the information and the financial means necessary for crossing and transport choose this option. Those without these capabilities are left waiting in the camps for the war to end.

## Ethiopia

Ethiopia is a completely different case of migrant production. There is more diversity in the motivations and reasons to leave the country. Ethiopia is still one of the poorest countries in the world with an average annual income in 2014 of €574 per capita, according to the World Bank website (December 2015). Though the percentage of people who live below the World Bank's Poverty Line ($1.23 a day, or 650 birr per month) has decreased substantially in the last decades because of economic growth – from 44 per cent in 1999 to 29 per cent in 2010 according to the World Bank – droughts and population growth challenge potential faster development. Stark poverty prevails among farmers. The traditional mainly agricultural population is increasingly moving to urban areas, particularly to Addis Ababa, which is estimated to have a population between 3.2 and 6 million depending on the source. The total percentage of the urban population in Ethiopia is officially 20 per cent, according to the World Fact Book.

At pace with development, the level of education is also moving forward, though the countryside lags behind compared to, for instance, Tanzania. According to UNESCO (2013), the gross enrolment in secondary school rose from 13 per cent in 1999 to 36 per cent in 2010. Though we observed that most children in the cities seem to be in school, this is not the case in rural areas. Overall in 2014 just 6 per cent of the 15–24-year-olds had finished secondary school and 5 per cent post-secondary school, while 11 per cent dropped out of secondary school and 55 per cent dropped out of primary school (Educational Policy Data Centre website, January 2016). In rural areas, school dropout rates are high, firstly because farmers need their children to work in the fields, and secondly because school books and uniforms are expensive for them. In the cities, the enrolment rate is high, and at private schools in the cities the dropout rate is almost zero.

The new class of educated youngsters found in the cities nowadays has generated a new problematic: a combination of diplomas, high aspirations and urban unemployment. The World Fact Book states that unemployment for 15–24-year-olds is 7 per cent, but one has to consider that unemployment in rural areas is zero, since everybody helps on the farms. In his article based on an Urban Socio Economic Survey household survey from 1994 among 1500 urban households in 12 cities, Sermeels (2007) stated that the unemployment

of youngsters aged 19–24 with secondary education is near to 50 per cent. He stated that most of them were queuing for 'good jobs', which the majority found after about four years.

## Aspirations and capabilities in Ethiopia

From our talks with Ethiopians with different educational backgrounds, we will show how the aspirations of three educational groups of people between 18 and 35 differ. We will consider people who are primary school dropouts, those who finished or nearly finished secondary school, and those who are university-educated.

Firstly, we found many examples of girls from poor villages who dropped out in the first years of primary school and secondary school dropouts. Their options in Ethiopia are limited to working on a farm or low-paid jobs like housemaid, waitress or cleaner, meaning an income just above the poverty line. Many of those who want to migrate aspire to go to Yemen or the Arab countries for a few years, to earn enough to buy a house and be able to support their family. Their aspiration is to get out of poverty, to earn enough to be a middle-class Ethiopian, and own a house and a TV 'without having to struggle'. De Regt and Tafesse (2015) describe this kind of migration of women, many of whom worked as housemaids in Yemen, the UAE or Saudi Arabia.

For those who finished secondary school but did not pass the university entry exam, the situation is slightly different. Many can find jobs, but not the kind of job they desire. Mains' (2012) study provides profound insight into the life of this kind of unemployed youngsters in Jimma, the mid-sized capital of Kaffa province. He shows how the *aspirations* of young secondary school graduates regarding jobs differ substantially from those of their parents, and from the actual professions that their parents have. While the fathers work in agriculture, as guards or ticket inspectors at the bus station, those with secondary school education aspire towards government or service-sector jobs, and are not interested in low-status jobs. In the recent past, when only very few people were educated, a desk job was guaranteed for secondary school graduates, but with their number increasing, this is no longer the case.[2] In our fieldwork we found, besides the unemployed and not well paid, also boys who aspired to be part of the high-status 'rich world'. Even though their life circumstances in Ethiopia were not bad, we saw strong aspirations to follow a family member or friend to the US and to make a lot of money. Sometimes family pressure added to this.

Among the highly educated Ethiopians with migration aspirations are those who are part of the existing transnational community. During the Dergue period, large refugee migration streams towards Europe and the US developed, and nowadays nearly all well-to-do families have some

members abroad. Additionally, university graduates are sometimes more critical about the not-yet-fully developed state, and seem interested in expressing political views freely. They impatiently look forward to Ethiopia becoming a fully fledged welfare state and democracy.

Looking at the *capabilities* of the (aspiring) migrants, we can sketch at least four pathways. The first is to try to get an invitation from an employer or a sponsorship through a friend, relative or acquaintance in Saudi Arabia or the Emirates. Having a sponsor can include an official work visa, for instance, for women to work as housemaids and for man in the construction sector. Travel to Yemen or the Arab countries via Djibouti and Somaliland costs between 52 and 1034 dollars, according to a survey held by Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) among 143 returnees in 2013 (RMMS 2014b, 75). Since 2015, this route is difficult due to the war in Yemen, but many still try to pass illegally, paying smugglers, sailors and drivers. Though the RMMS study shows that illegal travel is more expensive than legal travel, Ethiopians believe the opposite. The high travel costs are a problem for poor Ethiopians; so they depend on family members already in the Arab countries, on borrowing or on the community safety nets that traditionally raise money for big expenditures like funerals and weddings but nowadays increasingly finance migration.

The second migration pathway is to go to the US or Canada through marriage or the Diversity Visa Lottery. Again, it is usually a family member who is already abroad who pays the first sum as a sponsor, and after the immigrants arrive, they work and pay the rest from income and pay back their family. This process of paying back and divorcing takes several years.

We observed several cases where the future migrants had a reasonable job, so had saved enough for their trip. It is nowadays possible for Ethiopians to get a visa for the US and Europe, if one can show a certain sum of money, or property in Ethiopia. In another case, a boy asked for refugee status in the Netherlands who was already on a self-paid visit with a study visa.

Other possibilities to move out of Ethiopia include working in South Sudan as housemaids, hotel staff and builders, but this option is recently unsafe. None of our respondents considered the Libya–Italy route. This route is more popular among Eritreans, sometimes after staying in north Ethiopian refugee camps. Enormous sums of money (€10,000–12,000) disappear into the pockets of criminals who arrange the transport (RMMS 2014a, 2014b). Travelling with somebody else's European passport has become less common.

The capability to travel depends on money and to a large extent on family and friends that are already abroad. Ethiopians in Europe, the US and Arab countries spend large amounts of money to help others to move. The migration of Ethiopians is in the phase of network and chain migration. The first migrant pioneers left as students during Haile Selassie's time and

refugee migration peaked during the 'red terror period' of the Dergue regime. These migrants have formed communities in European countries and the US, which then attract others and help them to move. More recently, labour opportunities in Arab countries have developed.

Respondents mentioned often that migration led to disappointment: access to better jobs was disappointing; the ambitions were extremely high and rarely fulfilled. Recently the Ethiopian economy was growing and those who made money in or outside the country can lead a middle-class life. Return migration has become more common. This encourages others to see migration as a route to this kind of life style.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have looked into the motives for two types of migration: what is typically described as refugee migration, of Syrians from Syria's neighbouring countries, and what is typically described as economic migration, of young Ethiopians. Employing the key concepts 'aspirations' and 'capabilities' has helped to see how motives are actually centred on the prospects for better life circumstances and differ more for educational categories than between refugee and economic migration. Both for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and for poor Ethiopians, escaping from irregular or no income and potential lack of food, drives further migration. In both cases capabilities determine the strategy. Both wealthier Syrians and young Ethiopians, who have the capability to find sponsors or manage to save money, can raise the sum to travel. Furthermore, the Ethiopians case shows how aspirations are shaped by information from community members abroad and returnees. We conclude that both types of migration are bound to continue: Syrian migration because it is impossible for Syrians to have the life they aspire to in the countries around Syria, and Ethiopian migration as it is highly related to changing aspirations due to development.

## Notes

1. Turkey upheld its geographical limitation to the 1951 Convention and declared a temporary protection regime, ensuring non-refoulement and assistance in camps.
2. During the Dergue period, until 1991, the planned economy guaranteed university graduates jobs; graduates were assigned to jobs that the government thought necessary, often in remote areas.

## Disclosure statement

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