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Moved by modernity

How development shapes migration in rural Ethiopia

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CONCLUSION

In Wayisso, a village in the rural lowlands of the Ethiopian Rift Valley, ‘development’⁶⁴ entailed two migration transitions – from semi-nomadic pastoralism into settled agriculture, and from settled agriculture into more mobile, urban-centric lives. These profound livelihood shifts took place within just four generations. This dissertation asked what social forces drove these migration transitions in order to contribute to a broader debate about migration and development processes in the modern period.

Utilizing survey data from seventy-three Wayisso households, eighty-four in depth interviews, and ethnographic methods, this research traced the settlement and migration behavior of three family groups in Wayisso. It described how semi-nomadic pastoralist families gradually settled in Wayisso over the mid-20th century, and how Wayisso served as a center of gravity around which seasonal movement continued. This changed in the 1970s and 1980s, when agriculture became the primary livelihood occupation of rural households, and families “settled down” more permanently. By the 1990s and 2000s, a new form of movement, rural-urban migration, became increasingly common. Most of those who left Wayisso went to neighboring towns, Adami Tulu and Ziway. However, a few men began to settle in urban centers further away, while some women began traveling to the Middle East as labor migrants.

Among the first generation to leave Wayisso, (im)mobility outcomes varied significantly by gender, family, education and wealth. The descendants of Bedane Tuffaa, for example, showed higher levels of educational attainment and spatial mobility, and more lived in urban centers outside of the district. There was even one woman from this family living in London. International labor migration to the Middle East, however, clusters only among Dakabo Bulo’s descendants. This family showed slightly lower levels of education and mobility, but still significant out-migration to Ziway. Unlike the other two families, the descendants of Dakabo Uso showed high levels of immobility, relative to both internal or international migration – except among women who continue to move between rural areas for marriage.

The preceding chapters examined the migration consequences of different dimensions of social change on these migration trends, including of (1) population growth and diminishing

⁶⁴ As mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation uses the term ‘development’ in order to contribute to theory-building on the relationship between migration and development. When I use the term ‘development’, I speak about the social transformations associated with development in Ethiopia, regardless of whether these social changes actually improved the lives of people in Wayisso. Thus, I speak about development as it actually proceeds, not necessarily development as it *should be*. See page 26.

land-holding, (2) the rise of the Ethiopian nation-state and the various regimes' development policies, (3) the spread of market forces, (4) the expansion of formal education, and (5) changing notions of the 'good life.' This concluding chapter proceeds in two parts. First, I provide an overarching account of why people are leaving Wayisso, putting the main findings from previous chapters into conversation with each other. Second, I summarize the core theoretical findings and contributions this case study offers to future migration and development research, particularly as it concerns out-migration from rural areas in 'developing' countries.

Explaining Migration from Wayisso

To understand why people are leaving Wayisso, the analyses began with the most common 'push factor' explanations for rural out-migration in this region: climate change, population pressure, and land scarcity. The survey data shows that, indeed, Wayisso's population is growing, and there is not enough land for everyone to support a family as a farmer. Droughts remain common, and farmers will continue to struggle to make ends meet during certain years. However, population growth and diminishing land-holding do not explain why migration from Wayisso looks the way it does — why some people go to neighboring towns, others to the Middle East, and still others facing significant land constraints remain in Wayisso. These push factor explanations fail to account for the fact that migration, even just to a town some fifteen kilometers away, is the domain of the relatively privileged in Wayisso, those with enough discretionary income to sustain the costs of living in town.

Further, climate-related factors play a diminishing role in shaping the migration behavior of recent generations. Semi-nomadic pastoralism persisted well into the 1970s because it suited the semi-arid climate and erratic rainfall of the region. However, as Wayisso became incorporated into the modern Ethiopian nation-state, new political and economic forces began to influence the livelihood strategies of local peoples more than climate-related considerations. In fact, a long-term perspective shows that people actually began leaving Wayisso during years of higher than average rainfalls, and that in the 1980s, when there was comparatively lower average rainfall, people stayed in Wayisso and invested in agriculture. The analyses suggest that in Wayisso, periods of drought serve as a litmus test to reveal what people see as the most fruitful livelihood. Under the communist regime, droughts drove new farmers back to pastoralism. Today, drought reinforces notions that a better life is in town. Yet, rather than

driving migration per se, drought constrains rural-urban movement by reducing the incomes rural households have at their disposal to make a move to town.

Having established the need to look beyond land, climate, or population ‘push factors’ as explanations for out-migration from Wayisso, the analyses focused on the impact of other social forces. The gradual incorporation of this region into the modern state was particularly significant. Under the Ethiopian empire, older forms of community organization through the gada system gave way to the political logic of the bureaucratic state, initiating a gradual sedentarization process in Wayisso. More specifically, the introduction of taxes and new land allocation practices advanced a shift from barter to money economies and from collective to private property. Communal grazing lands began to be claimed by individuals, who then traded their cattle at markets to pay land taxes to the state. At the same time, families began to establish more permanent dwellings in Wayisso, around which semi-nomadic movements continued.

The 1974 communist revolution accelerated the process of ‘settling down’ by bringing the state closer to Wayisso than ever before. The Derg’s development policies further shifted local relationships to land and livelihood, by nationalizing all land, creating ‘peasant associations’ and new forms of government work, and introducing formal education. Although Wayisso households initially resisted becoming farmers, by the end of the 1980s, almost all were farming plots of state-owned land allocated by household. The Derg also introduced new forms of movement — military or labor conscription, for example — but the more fundamental mobility transition during this period was the settlement of a semi-nomadic people into a single place, administratively circumscribed by the state. This settlement became the foundation upon which new forms of migration would emerge in the subsequent decades.

The first major movements to urban areas occurred under the federalist government that took power in the 1990s after the fall of the Derg. Initially led by Meles Zenawi and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, this ‘developmental state’ accelerated Ethiopia’s urban-transition by abandoning an ‘agriculture-led’ industrialization policy and embracing market forces in pursuit of rapid economic growth. The analyses showed how the thinking of small-holder farmers in Wayisso came to mirror the development thinking of the state. Farmers also abandoned agriculture and embraced the market as the way to material prosperity. As a result, farmers in Wayisso today maintain their farmlands, because for most it is all they have. But they aspire towards—and if they have the means, actively pursue—alternative income-generating opportunities in town.

The political-economic transformations pursued by different Ethiopian states reconfigured the socioeconomic landscape within which people in Wayisso could pursue their

livelihoods. Equally profound are corresponding transformations in how people conceptualize the idea of a ‘livelihood.’ Today, a good livelihood is measured not in cattle, but in income. This has fundamental implications for how people think about work, and how they think about migration. The ‘migration decision-making’ of earlier generations of semi-nomadic pastoralists was shaped by concerns for climate, and where they could best graze their cattle or rest for a season. Today, migration decision-making is along a few, specified pathways and motivated by the pursuit of money – not simply for money’s sake, but because of the social, economic and spatial mobility that money can buy in ‘modern’ society. These findings thus suggest that as Ethiopian economy ‘develops’ – entailing, in practice, that the forces of the market become stronger and the practice of consumption increases – migration begins to make more sense for more people.

In this regard, by examining the decision-making of young women who leave for the Middle East, I suggest that their reasoning is impossible to understand without appreciating the impact of capitalist market expansion in their society. Migration to the Middle East for domestic work gives access to unprecedented incomes for under-educated women. It is precisely because of the commodification of so many dimensions of social life, and because of the increasing power of money to disrupt an otherwise predictable, rural future, that women consider leaving and their families often support them. The experience of female labor migrants thus contributes to a broader discussion about whether migration fuels or disrupts existing inequalities. On the one hand, this case study shows that migration to town is only possible for those who have the financial means to invest in a migration project and sustain the cost of living an urban life. The remittances urban migrants send back can further the divide between families that participate in migration and those who do not. On the other hand, the experiences of female labor emigrants suggest that migration can also disrupt long-standing inequalities, previously determined by family, ethnicity or gender.

These cultural-economic shifts are compounded by the expansion of formal education, a key project of the Ethiopian state. In Wayisso, widening access to formal schooling has a profound influence on the aspirations and migration behavior of young people. The survey data reveals a strong positive correlation between educational attainment and spatial mobility. Education drives migration out of Wayisso for several reasons. First, access to secondary and higher education requires a move to town. For those whose family can afford it, education is often the first reason young people migrate. Second, after experiencing life in town, including access to basic infrastructure like water and electricity, or new services like television and the internet, students often do not want to return to village life. Third, and more subtly, the content

of formal schooling—its formal and ‘hidden’ curriculum—orients young people’s aspirations towards urban, professional futures. Accordingly, the spatial location of schooling initially drives rural-outmigration, but the content and experience of formal education leads students to develop aspirations and expectations for their lives that cannot be fulfilled in rural areas. These findings suggest that providing higher levels of education to rural areas may alleviate the initial need to move to town for schooling, but will more likely delay, rather than reverse, the general urban-ward shift in migration aspirations and behavior (see also Massey et al 2010).

Finally, the analyses showed that within any dimension of social change, there is always a two-fold process at work: transformations in the structural dimensions of a population’s material lives and transformations in their collective social imaginaries — both of which have implications for, among many other things, the ways in which people move and settle. This dissertation gave direct attention to changing notions of the ‘good life,’ as an indicator of broader shifts in the social imaginary. In Wayisso, the good life used to be a rural and pastoral one, measured in cattle, milk and butter. The towns were initially places for the poor. Today, the opposite is true. The village is widely perceived as a place of poverty, stagnation and struggle, while the city offers the prospect of *change*. This urbanization of the good life suggests that people will continue to leave Wayisso even if objective opportunities to improve their rural livelihoods increase. Perhaps the good life will one day return to rural areas like Wayisso. However, given the current trajectory of development in Ethiopia, this will unlikely be anytime soon.

Implications for Migration and Development Research

The Wayisso case study makes two core contributions to a broader debate about why people are leaving rural lives in ‘developing’ countries around the world. First, the Wayisso case study shows why it is important to consider different dimensions of development and social transformation on migration behavior. A social transformation approach, as applied in this dissertation, shows that rural-urban and international migration from Wayisso is caused by a complex constellation of social changes: widening access to formal education; political-economic transformations that concentrate economic and educational opportunity in urban areas; population growth and diminishing land-holding for younger generations; growing connectivity and infrastructure development between rural and urban places; and the urbanization of the good life. These social shifts contribute to the emergence of migration

systems (between Wayisso village and neighboring towns, or between Wayisso and the Middle East), which then facilitates the further movement of others (c.f. Mabogunje 1971).

Only focusing on one dimension of social change can lead to imbalanced and one-sided migration explanations. For example, this research shows that a focus on economic change is important to explain why women and men from Wayisso increasingly orient their livelihood strategies to pursue income-generating opportunities in town. However, economic explanations alone can miss the socially-constructed migration pathways available to people based on, for example, gender. The same economic motivations that lead a young man to move from Wayisso to Ziway may motivate a young woman to move temporarily to the Middle East, in order to finance a move to town upon her return. In addition, economic explanations can miss how, for example, aspirations and expectations engendered by the formal education contribute to a social devaluation of certain kinds of income-generating opportunities. Changing aspirations explain why some educated individuals may prefer unemployment or migration over jobs at the ‘bottom’ of the hierarchy (cf. Piore 1971; Mains 2013). A social transformation approach thus shows why it is important to look beyond a single indicator to explain migration behavior.

The second core contribution of this research is to show why changing aspirations should be taken as seriously as structural constraints on rural livelihoods when analyzing why and how rural people migrate. The Wayisso case shows that *constraints* on rural livelihoods do not explain why people are leaving. Rather, other powerful forces of social change – the introduction of formal education, growing rural-urban connectivity, and the emergence of new kinds of economic opportunity in town, for example – orient aspirations towards urban futures. In fact, livelihood constraints better explain why people stay in Wayisso. Many households desire to migrate, but lack the resources to support a move to town.

Attention to aspirational change can overcome a common tendency to describe rural out-migration, even under highly constrained conditions, as ‘forced.’ For example, a Wayisso farmer with five sons and only one hectare of land will rightly conclude that agriculture is not a sustainable livelihood, in its current form, for future generations. However, for the observer to conclude that this farmer’s sons, or their children, are ‘forced’ to abandon agricultural livelihoods misses the profound aspirational shifts occurring at the same time that land becomes increasingly scarce. Because aspirations are increasingly oriented towards urban futures, young farmers do not prioritize investing in the agricultural innovation and intensification needed to make small holder farming more productive. Even were a family to

receive more land in Wayisso, the discretionary income it could generate would more likely support a rural to urban change in lifestyle than encourage them to stay.

The profound force of ‘changing aspirations’ is not unique to Wayisso. In fact, there appear to be remarkably common shifts in the nature and direction of aspirational change, associated with ‘development,’ occurring in rural places elsewhere. For example, across Ethiopia, researchers note a strong resistance among rural youth in Ethiopia—particularly those with education—to “end up like their farmer parents” (Tadele and Gella 2012: 6; see also Sumberg et al 2012). Young Ethiopians increasingly aspire towards urban, professional futures (Camfield 2011; Abebe 2008; Mains 2013; Maurus 2016; Schewel and Fransen 2018a). Similarly, in Northern Ghana, Laube (2016) shows that rural youth now believe ‘modern careers’ are the only way to succeed in life, and thus invest their energy and incomes in education rather than agriculture. In rural India, Morrow (2013) finds the widening access to formal education generates new aspirations for professional futures among children and their families; part of this aspirational shift is a concomitant devaluation of farming, even among those who have no other livelihood option. In Peru, Crivello (2011) shows that young people and their parents see education as the only way to ‘become somebody in life.’ But for rural youth, ‘becoming somebody’ often requires moving ‘someplace else’; rural youth imagine their futures in the next biggest town or capital city (Crivello 2011: 409; Crivello 2015). These aspirational shifts thus carry significant migration consequences. How processes of development shape the aspirations of rural populations is an important area for further comparative research.

Finally, this dissertation suggests that, given the nature of development in the modern period, to fundamentally alter or reverse these migration trends—that is, rising levels of rural-urban and international migration as low-income countries ‘develop’—would require a fundamental remolding of the political, economic, and cultural forces that shape the world today. Improving agricultural production systems here, offering vocational education there, or expanding opportunities for local employment may shape local variations in migration patterns, but they are unlikely to change overarching migration trends. As rural peoples gain access to higher levels of education, income, information, and networks, many will direct their new capabilities to move to where they believe that the good life can be found. Increasingly, that is in urban areas. Rather than alleviating the root causes of migration, then, this research shows why development itself is the root cause of much contemporary migration.