

The State, Families and Disappeared Migrants in Ethiopia

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Each year, thousands of Ethiopian migrants depart the country irregularly towards Europe by crossing the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea, but also traveling to the Gulf States via Djibouti, the Red Sea and Yemen, and to South Africa through the Indian Ocean or several African countries in-between. Regardless of the migration route they pursue, thousands of Ethiopian migrants have died or gone missing. Despite the ubiquitous and regular coverage of migrant deaths in global media, there is limited understanding of the impacts that these deaths and disappearances have on their loved ones and the roles of the state in preventing risky migration that leads to disappearance during fatal journeys. While much has been written about the tragic circumstances leading to their deaths and disappearances, much less is known about how their families search for missing migrants, including the structural and institutional challenges they encounter in the process, and how their overlapping experiences can better inform good practices. This article thus (a) explores the causes and conditions of missing Ethiopian migrants; (b) identifies the challenges and needs of families in Ethiopia who have relatives who went missing or died in the context of international migration; and (c) maps the relevant laws, policy and institutional frameworks already in existence, their gaps as well as the actors and their roles relevant to the topic. Data for this article was generated through interviews with families and stakeholders, policy reviews as well as participant observation and desk research; this work was carried out over three months in 2020 and two months in 2021.

Keywords: Ethiopia, migration, missing persons, borders, human trafficking, family

INTRODUCTION

As safe, dignified and legal migration pathways are limited, quite large number of Ethiopians engage in risky and long journeys towards Europe, the Middle East and to South Africa by crossing dangerous deserts, seas and conflict-prone areas (IOM, 2018a; Horwood and Forin, 2019). These journeys are mostly fatal, with thousands of Ethiopians believed to have died or gone missing, due to criminal attacks, kidnappings, accidents, shipwrecks, or lack of access to medicine, shelter and food along the way. However, very limited empirical knowledge and systematic analysis exist with regard to the context of missing migrants, impacts on families left behind and related challenges in Ethiopia. Much less is also known about the legal and institutional frameworks protecting the rights of missing migrants and their gaps when it comes to missing migrants. Thus, the focus of the article is to explore the needs and challenges of families of missing migrants by taking into account the gaps in existing legal and institutional frameworks.

Families of those missing migrants along the migration routes and in destination countries spend years not knowing what has happened to their loved ones. Families encounter multiple personal, legal and financial challenges when searching for their missing loved ones and when trying to repatriate the remains in the event of death. Even though the Ethiopian state has several national laws and resources dedicated to migration management and has adopted and ratified relevant international human and migrant rights conventions (Estifanos, 2017; Tekalign, 2021), there are gaps in policies, legal frameworks or institutions to deal with the specific needs and concerns of families of missing or dead migrants. Those challenges furthermore include getting help in searching for missing persons, identification and repatriation of remains from abroad, and the emotional and socioeconomic impacts of the loss.

By drawing on this gap, this article explores the factors accounting for disappearing migrants and the challenges and needs of Ethiopian families whose loved ones went missing or died in the context of international migration. The article also maps out and analyzes the legal, policy and institutional frameworks applicable to issues of missing migrants in Ethiopia. The researcher collected data for the article through qualitative interviews with stakeholders and families, as well as participant observation and policy and legal framework analysis, which were carried out over three months in 2020 and two months 2021.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This article is based on desk research, supplemented by participant observation, face-to-face qualitative interviews, and policy reviews. The desk research involved systematic reviews of legal and policy frameworks. The research design is basically phenomenological. The focus of the researcher was to analyze factors accounting for the disappearance of migrants and identify what families with missing or dead

migrant relatives defined as their challenges and needs in the context of a search or the aftermath of the death or disappearance of a family member. The intention was not to be representative, but to gain insight into the lives of people living with such a loss, through a qualitative methodology. In total, 21 family members, from 21 different households, between the ages of 25 and 66 were interviewed during 2020 and 2021. Twelve of these family members were men (fathers and brothers of missing migrants), and nine were women (mothers and sisters). Ten interviews were conducted in Addis Ababa and eleven in Hadiya. In Hadiya, interviews were conducted in Hadiya language and occasionally in Amharic. In Addis Ababa, all interviews were conducted in Amharic. The interview data was supplemented through a review of the Ethiopian context and included an examination of the country's laws and regulations relevant to the matter of migrant deaths and disappearances. Informants were selected purposively for having a family member missed during migration processes.

In terms of defining research participants, the focus was on the nuclear family (that is, biological parents, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters) of a person who had gone missing or died in the context of a migratory journey, but the relatives and acquaintances who held close emotional, social and economic ties to the nuclear family were also considered to be nuclear family members. The sample size was not meant to be representative of all families with missing migrants in the country, but rather was explorative to show the trend and nature of the problem.

The selection of rural and urban field sites was done in consultation with the literature reviews. The researcher conducted fieldwork with urban families in the neighborhood of Qirqos in Addis Ababa, and in Hadiya in southern Ethiopia, both of which have historically high levels of out-migration. Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, is a vast metropolis of nearly 5 million inhabitants. It has been a major sending and transit location for Ethiopians embarking on irregular migration to Europe, the Gulf States and South Africa (Belloni, 2019; Kefale and Gebresenbet, 2021). It was also the epicenter of refugee migration to Europe following the conflicts and civil wars during the Dergue regime in Ethiopia (1967–1991) (Girmachew, 2018). The success stories of this Diaspora and their active transnational economic, political and social engagement with people in Addis Ababa have continued to fuel the migration aspirations of the current Ethiopian youth.

Multiple factors such as political repression, demographics, youth unemployment, the availability of technology and the existence of diasporic networks combined with personal aspirations, drive migration from Addis Ababa (Triulzi, 2013; Kefale and Gebresenbet, 2021), and specifically from the working-class neighborhood of Qirqos (Kirkos), the selected research site. Qirqos is known locally for the vast numbers of young people who have embarked on long journeys to Europe through Libya since the early 2000s, relying on the eastern trans-Saharan migration route. Migration to Europe is a socially and morally accepted and deeply rooted practice among youth in Qirqos. Informants in Addis Ababa estimated that each family in Qirqos has lost at least one family member for everyone who has made

it to Europe safely. The familiarity with migrant death and loss was one of the reasons that Qirqos was selected as a site of research for this study.

Hadiya, on the other hand, was selected given its rural context, in addition to being known among informants as one of the regions in Ethiopia with high numbers of migrant deaths (in the migration towards South Africa). Residents here believe that the number of missing and dead exceeds any estimates and that migrant tragedies of families remain unknown and untold. Local officials consulted for this briefing referred to several of these incidents. For example, in 2017, more than 80 migrants from Hadiya and neighboring Kambatta died of suffocation inside containers during transit; however, the case was not made public. Similarly, in 2019, 45 Hadiya migrants died as they traveled from Tanzania to Malawi in an overloaded truck across dangerous highways. While research conducted in either Qirqos or Hadiya cannot be seen as representative of the experiences of all families in Ethiopia or of the challenges Ethiopians face in response to the deaths and disappearances of their migrant loved ones, both contexts provide important insights into the conditions surrounding the loss and the search process in Ethiopia.

Aware of the deeply sensitive nature of the study, the researcher conducted all interviews with the participants' best interests in mind. The researcher followed the ethical guidelines, including securing informed consent and maintaining the privacy, dignity and anonymity of the families (all names used in this article are pseudonyms). Emotionally distressed and economically precarious families were given contacts to relevant charity and state organizations for the immediate or future provision of psychosocial and economic support. While the researcher used an interview guide, the approach was inductive and participatory in nature – in other words, the families were invited to direct the conversations and to identify what they themselves considered important aspects of their experiences with the goal of allowing them to articulate their own authentic reflections.

The study also generated data from the analysis of legal and institutional frameworks, interviews with relevant stakeholders and their roles with regard to the issue of missing migrants. For the legal review and policy analysis, the researcher collected information on global, regional and bilateral instruments/conventions; national laws; proclamations; policies; and regulations/directives. The review was used to identify the existing gaps in national laws, institutions, policies and practices relating to the protection of missing migrants, their families' needs, and the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders relevant to missing migrants. The researcher recorded, transcribed, and translated the interviews and organized the notes taken. The interviews were integrated into legal and policy reviews; gaps in the legislatures were identified; and stakeholders, their roles and responsibilities were mapped. The researcher sorted the data thematically and organized it to ensure the logical flow of ideas and arguments.

LITERATURE REVIEW: GLOBAL TRENDS AND FACTORS ACCOUNTING FOR MISSING MIGRANTS

The literature addresses different dimensions of missing migrants. Some of the existing studies provide trends and statistical estimations of missing migrants at various locations of the world. The International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Missing Migrants Project tracks and publishes deaths of migrants, including refugees and asylum-seekers, who have died or gone missing in the process of migration towards an international destination. The IOM (2018b) estimated that between 2014 and 2017 about 15,348 deaths occurred at the European Union (EU)'s borders alone. The IOM's reports and publications on fatal journeys have recorded the magnitude of missing migrants in Africa, Middle East and Latin America during the last 15 years (Sanchez Dionis et al., 2021). The IOM has also calculated that at least 60,000 migrants have died between 2000 and 2018 globally (IOM, 2018a).

Many studies identified conditions and driving factors that led to the deaths and disappearance of migrants during fatal journeys. Complex conditions related to immigration controls and border enforcement mechanisms along the migration pathways, compounded by illness and lack of access to medical treatment in detention centers result in the deaths and disappearances of migrants (IOM, 2014; HRW, 2019; MSF, 2020). Other factors related to deportation practices to remote locations in places such as the Sahara Desert in response to the European Union's externalization of borders (Tekalign, 2018; Monella and Creta, 2020), also increasingly place migrants in vulnerable situations that could result in their deaths and disappearances. The incidence of kidnapping or torture for ransom resulting in deaths and disappearances among migrants has been widely documented in Yemen, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Mozambique, and Malawi (Horwood, 2014; Horwood and Forin, 2019). Other conditions that resulted in the deaths and disappearances of migrants include: the experiences of abuse, exploitation or human trafficking on their migration journeys; migration journeys via more remote and distant pathways to reach a destination; incidents of migrants dying of suffocation in containers or lorries during transit; and those – dead or alive – being deliberately thrown into the sea by smugglers from overcrowded boats, have been reported by survivors (UN News, 2017; IOM, 2020; Zakoska-Todorovska and Bartolini, 2020). There are numerous reports that show migrants being abandoned by smugglers after they had run out of fuel, become lost, or encountered law enforcement or border control authorities (IOM, 2014; Hairsine, 2019; Reidy, 2019).

A study by Simon Robins shows the underlining structural factors such as exclusionary border control practices, that ignored missing migrants. He argues that “while living migrants are the object of enormous attention, counted and screened on arrival and throughout their presence in European states ... those who die crossing the Mediterranean remain uncounted and largely unidentified, as a result of a failure of European states to collect data from both bodies and from families looking for missing loved ones” (Robins, 2019: 1). This is partly because dead migrants are often

considered as no longer presenting any economic or security threat to European welfare states, compared to those entering clandestinely. Migrant deaths in the Mediterranean waters, resulted from externalization of EU borders; in fact, the externalization serves as a border control tool (Kovras and Robins, 2016). The deaths and disappearances of migrants during fatal journeys demonstrate the structural violence inflicted on migrants, which is manifested via the inequality between citizens of the global north and the global south in accessing safe migration pathways. The everyday violence, suffering and deaths of migrants during irregular journeys are directly related to the strict border controls and securitization of migration by destination states (Holmes, 2013).

Existing studies often focus on these and other driving factors and conditions resulting in the deaths and disappearance of migrants. Despite the pervasive and regular coverage of migrant deaths in the global media, there is limited understanding of the impacts that these deaths and disappearances have on their families left behind. This article therefore strives to fill this knowledge gap by foregrounding the cases of Ethiopian families of missing migrants. There are few emerging studies that documented some of the challenges to families (see for example, Attia et al., 2016; ICRC, 2017; Robins, 2017; Vogt, 2018; Sánchez Dionis et al., 2021). This paper builds on these studies and adds to the empirical knowledge by documenting the experiences of Ethiopian families searching for missing relatives lost in the context of irregular migration journeys to Europe, the Gulf States and South Africa.

Context of irregular migration from Ethiopia

The literature estimates that about half a million Ethiopians migrate annually to destination countries in the Middle East, Europe, South Africa, Australia and the US, fueling a vibrant global Diaspora estimated at approximately three million (IOM, 2018b; Kefale and Gebresenbet, 2021). According to Tekalign (2021) about 70% of Ethiopian migration to international destinations is undertaken by young men and women between the ages of 16 and 22, who embark on irregular journeys across dangerous overland and sea routes (Tekalign, 2021). One third of those making such journeys get lost or die along the routes due to man-made and natural risks and disasters. Families who have lost their loved ones due to migration, experience psychosocial, legal, economic, and administrative challenges.

Ethiopian migrants engage in long and dangerous clandestine migratory journeys to international destinations. There are three major migratory routes along which Ethiopians depart the country. The first one is the north-western route towards Europe, which links villages and towns in Ethiopia to Khartoum, and the Sudan, and proceeds via the Eastern Sahara Desert into Libya and then across the Central Mediterranean Sea. The second is the eastern route to the Middle East and the Gulf States, through Djibouti and Somalia via Yemen, which involves crossing the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The third one is the southern route to South Africa via Eastern and Southern African countries (Estifanos et al., 2019; Williams, 2019).

Local brokers and smugglers facilitate these fragmented and risky journeys.

Structural, social, familial, and individual conditions drive migration in general, and youth migration from Ethiopia in particular. Conflict, displacement, poverty, and unemployment have been cited as the main driving factors spurring young Ethiopians to leave their country (Girmachew, 2018; Williams, 2019). However, contrary to the commonly held assumptions claiming that poverty reduction would directly lead to a decline in outbound migration from Ethiopia, there are some indicators that it may even lead to increased mobility. The poorest people migrate to the nearest destinations (mostly in-country). The number of migrants on a given route are inversely proportional to the length of that route. In financial terms, the main routes used by Ethiopians could be categorized into three major groups: expensive routes (mainly Europe and North America) that require more than USD 7,000; medium-cost routes (Africa and Asia) that require a minimum of USD 4,000; and budget routes (Middle Eastern countries) that require as little as USD 500 (Tekalign, 2021). Migrants traveling to the nearest destinations within the country and outside the country (such as the Middle East) are mostly female (Girmachew, 2018). In addition to the financial capability required, demand in these Middle Eastern countries for specific services and labor – such as domestic helpers and construction workers – also plays an important role in attracting female and low-skilled migrants.

Both internal and external migration from Ethiopia, is primarily a cultural and socioeconomic developmental issue. Young Ethiopians migrate mainly due to the disjuncture between actual living conditions, on the one hand, and the expectation of higher living standards, on the other. Socioeconomic determinants of migration in Ethiopia are related to the following four major factors: (a) the discrepancies between the aspired living standards by the youth and their actual living conditions in their own country; (b) the income inequalities between persons staying in the country and migrants or families with relatives in the Ethiopian Diaspora; (c) the high population growth, increasing unemployment rate, and relatively low incomes in Ethiopia; and (d) the pervasive culture of migration and the collective societal encouragement of even risky and irregular migration (evidenced by the direct moral and financial support accorded to migrants) (Kefale and Gebresenbet, 2021; Tekalign, 2021).

Of all factors, the pervasive culture of migration, often fueled by the Diaspora network in the form of peer pressure, alongside family support, constitutes the most prevalent driver of migration from Ethiopia (Girmachew, 2018; Kefale and Gebresenbet, 2021). Migration is no longer an individual decision and has increasingly become a collective action with the support of relatives in the Diaspora as well as religious and traditional community leaders (Kefale and Gebresenbet, 2021). In migration hotspot areas such as Wollo in northern Ethiopia and Hadiya in the south, communities take collective decisions to encourage members to migrate, so much so, that families in some communities organize parties where the neighbors are invited to bid farewell to departing migrants. Community and religious leaders are invited to attend and ‘bless’ the party and the migrant or migrants. Such ‘migration showers’

or farewell parties are used to seek contributions from the community to cover travel expenses.

Migration from Ethiopia to the Middle East, Europe, and South Africa and within the IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) region is of sizable proportion and it is expected to rise in the coming years, particularly flows to the Middle East, neighboring countries and to the East African Community (EAC) countries including Kenya and Uganda. Migration, and more especially mobility within the country and the region, is expected to increase due to a number of factors exhibited by mega-trends such as Diaspora engagements and new migration laws. The information and communications technology (ICT) and aviation connectivity as well as other infrastructural developments in the region will certainly grow at accelerated rates, leading to surges in mobility within the IGAD region and beyond. Increased local job protection and restrictive migration policies as well as potential increases in xenophobic and 'Afro-phobic' attacks against Ethiopians could however increase in countries of destination (De Regt and Medareshae, 2016; Kefale and Gebresenbet, 2021).

FINDINGS

Causes and conditions of Ethiopian migrant deaths and disappearances

Clandestine migration from Ethiopia towards Europe, the Gulf States, and South Africa requires long journeys and can pose many risks en route and it is estimated that of every four migrants undertaking the journey, at least one dies or disappears along the way (IOM, 2014; Botti, 2019; MMC, 2020). However, it is impossible to provide exact numbers of missing or dead Ethiopian migrants. The numbers available constitute an incomplete record, yet are indicative of how many of them go missing on the migration journeys. Although only estimates – since information on nationality is often lacking – Ethiopians are systematically identified among the missing and the dead in the Mediterranean Sea, through gathering information from survivors and DNA tests (IOM, 2014, 2018a). A significant number of deaths have also been reported along the eastern route to the Gulf States and on the southern routes to South Africa (IOM, 2014). Data collected by the Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs (BOLSA) in southern Ethiopia, and the Mixed Migration Centre also reflects the lethality of the route to South Africa (MMC, 2019). According to the Central Statistics Authority's Labor Migration Survey (LMS) 2021, an estimated 51,089 Ethiopians are missing migrants, with the majority of these being males (84.6%), while females account for 15.4% (CSA, 2021).

While these are important sources, statistics concerning deaths and disappearances are not recorded systematically within Ethiopia itself or by any of its government entities, which creates a serious statistical gap. As indicated above, it is only in 2021, with the support from the IOM, that the Central Statistics Authority of Ethiopia has included missing migrants in its Labor Migration Survey data.

Data from the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC, 2019, 2020) and the Missing Migrants Project (IOM, 2017) indicates that migrants departing from Ethiopia have died as a result of the physical hardships encountered during their journeys on foot, on board boats and trucks that deliberately traverse remote mountain ranges, deserts and open seas. Exposure to harsh environments leads to death by dehydration, exhaustion and starvation. Many migrants also die by drowning in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean; by suffocation inside containers; following attacks by fauna; as a result of violent practices by border guards, smugglers and militias; and also, as a result of gender-based forms of violence (Horwood, 2014; Global Initiative, 2018; Horwood and Forin, 2019). The occurrence of kidnapping or torture for ransom resulting in deaths and disappearances among Ethiopian migrants has also been widely documented in contexts like Yemen, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Mozambique, and Malawi. Many Ethiopian women also experience violence and die as a result of harsh working and living conditions or labor exploitation in domestic work or xenophobic attacks in the Gulf States and in South Africa (De Regt and Medareshae, 2016; Busza et al., 2017).

The southern routes to Southern Africa are generally considered the most dangerous to navigate by Ethiopian migrants. This appears to be confirmed by data from the Mixed Migration Centre, indicating that the deaths and disappearances of Ethiopian migrants tripled along the eastern and southern routes between 2016 and 2019, as migration along these routes increased following the restrictions on the northern route to Europe as a result of the EU externalization of border controls towards East Africa (Strange and Oliveira Martins, 2019; MMC, 2020). Between 2012 and 2019, the Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs (BOLSA) in Southern Ethiopia recorded migrant deaths and disappearances along this route from major sending districts including Hadiya and Kambata Tambaro. During this period, the Bureau recorded 4,265 deaths and the disappearance of 1,707 missing migrants (BOLSA, 2020). This data was gathered from testimonies made by families and survivors, and by field reports at Ethiopian embassies along the migration routes. However, many more deaths are neither recorded nor reported, as there is no established institution mandated with this task in Ethiopia.

Challenges faced by families of missing migrants

This section outlines the challenges faced by families while searching for missing or disappeared loved ones who departed Ethiopia with the purpose of migrating to another country and the impacts on living with their loss. After describing how families take action to search for their missing loved ones in both research sites (Hadiya and Addis Ababa), the study examines cross-cutting issues faced by the families, including challenging gender dynamics; outstanding debts; demands for ransom for their kidnapped relatives; mental and physical health problems; and the role of spirituality and social relations. Overall, three challenges emerged as common experiences of the participants, as captured below.

Firstly, it is often impossible to determine when a person left, let alone when (or where) they went missing. Many migrants leave without informing friends or family members, abandoning their neighborhoods or villages without notice, and leaving no details concerning their plans or destination. It is only once migrating groups arrive at points along the migration journey, such as in Sudan or even Libya, that migrants contact their families, or that their co-travelers and companions call with updates, to request money to continue their travel, or to report accidents or fatalities that took place during the journey, or even to return to Ethiopia if they are unable to continue the journey. These delays prevent the timely deployment of a search mission and the likelihood of a positive outcome (that is, the ability to determine the whereabouts of a missing loved one).

Secondly, the search for missing loved ones, and its aftermath, have deeply gendered dynamics. Interviews indicated that the decision of when to start or stop searching tends to often be made by male relatives (fathers or older sons), but also by someone in the family considered to have the ability 'to remain calm' (most often a man). According to the tradition in both research sites, men are considered by families as emotionally stable and have the ability to cope with hardships and hence are given the task of searching. Women (the widows or daughters of missing migrants) reported often having to challenge the decisions made by their fathers or brothers-in-law concerning the search, but also the control of any property or their ability to remarry – all factors impacting on the short- and long-term financial stability of women and their children. These gender dimensions of missing persons are described and analyzed in detail in subsequent sections.

Thirdly, there is a lack of formal institutions or mechanisms to support families looking for migrants who went missing while pursuing their journeys. This has led to the emergence of community-based forms of information gathering and support, but not to the establishment of responses by the state. The following sections discuss these three challenges in more detail.

a. Searching challenges

All interviewees shared their experiences of losing a loved one who decided to embark on a migratory journey, and the initial confusion concerning how to jumpstart a search. Many of them reported being unaware that their loved one had decided to migrate. Many people (particularly young men) reportedly left without informing friends or family members, abandoning their neighborhoods or villages without notice, and leaving no details concerning their plans and destinations. Yet even in the case of migrants who did inform their families about their journeys, or who traveled with their support, it was also difficult to determine when or where the person had gone missing. This was partly the result of migrants themselves being constrained by several factors, such as the lack of financial means or their uncertainty of whether they have to communicate or not to manage information concerning their journeys. For example, many tell their loved ones that they will be in touch once they reach

their destination because they do not know what will happen during journeys. Often, having little information themselves about their itineraries or the locations through which they travel, migrants may opt not to communicate.

Most families expressed respect for the decision of their loved ones to manage the flow of information. However, many others shared they had started their own searches as soon as they received, by way of friends, relatives, smugglers, brokers, news or social media, reports concerning incidents involving migrants, that could involve their family members. Searches also began whenever the pattern of communication with the migrating family member changed or ended without a reason. Still, families indicated it had been difficult for them to decide when, where and how to start searching, because they had limited information concerning their loved ones' journeys.

In Hadiya, rural families reported relying mainly on information shared by people who had traveled with their missing loved ones (other migrants, guides or smugglers,). For most, the first person they contacted was the broker or smuggler who had facilitated the journey, followed by attempts to reach other migrants known to have traveled with their loved one, or any known survivors. If none of these efforts were successful, or if additional information was needed, interviewees indicated they would report the case to members of the Ethiopian Diaspora in the last country the missing person was known to travel through. In the case of migrants traveling to South Africa, interviewees reported calling friends, relatives and South Africa-based smugglers for information about recent migrant journeys over land or through the Indian Ocean. Despite the stigma that surrounds their activities, smugglers are often recognized for their willingness and ability to access contacts and information that could establish or inform the whereabouts of a missing person. Interviewees indicated how smugglers often had information concerning vehicular accidents, could contact border guards for information concerning any migrants being detained or imprisoned while transiting countries such as Tanzania, Malawi, and Mozambique, or members of smuggling and brokering networks operating from Ethiopia all the way down to South Africa, which expedited the dissemination of information.

Families of migrants from Hadiya also reported relying on the *iddir*¹ system and its social networks to obtain information about missing migrants. *Iddir* plays a vital role in investigating and collecting data about missing and dead migrants since many of their members either have a good rapport with smugglers or are smugglers themselves. *Iddir* leaders broadcast the information to the members and support families using the network as a platform.

Fieldwork in Addis Ababa revealed somewhat different search patterns. Only a few families reported seeking information about relatives from smugglers themselves. Contrary to the experiences of Hadiya families, smugglers operating in Addis Ababa were believed to have limited information concerning specific journeys followed

¹ *Iddir* are community-based support networks, common in rural areas of Ethiopia, that garner financial resources to minimize the adverse effects of sudden shocks or crises (Aredo, 2010).

by migrants traveling along the northern route. From the interviewees' perspective, this was due to the fact that the facilitation of migration along the northern route is organized in a different fashion. Interviewees indicated that contrary to the case of the southern route, where a single smuggler or broker tends to be the contact person for the entire duration of the journey, smugglers on the northern route tend to work more independently and do not know each other. They perform specific tasks, charging separate, stand-alone fees, and are therefore less likely to be in contact with a migrant for the entire duration of their journey (see Lucht, 2011). This drastic difference in their modus operandi implies that often, contacts with smugglers operating along the northern route yielded limited or no information concerning a missing migrant. Personal and community ties, as well as interactions with smugglers were also reportedly weaker in the urban context, compared to those reported by families in Hadiya.

Families in Addis Ababa were also more likely than those in Hadiya to follow local and international news coverage for information concerning missing persons. Informants stated that in Addis Ababa interviewees were also more likely to reach out to relatives or friends in other countries whenever they saw reports of shipwrecks involving migrant-carrying boats in the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea or the Indian Ocean. They also seemed more inclined than families in Hadiya to rely on social media networking sites for their searches, screening community groups for information about missing or dead migrants. In Addis Ababa, interviewees reported having learned of the deaths of loved ones from photos posted on Facebook, often made by other migrants (particularly young people) or by government organizations, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ethiopian consulates along migration routes.

Seyum's brother, Eyasu, is believed to have been killed by ISIS in Libya in 2015. Seyum has been searching for details concerning Eyasu on behalf of his family ever since the tragedy. Seyum was notified of Eyasu's apparent death via a phone call he received from a friend he believed had identified Eyasu's death online. This is what he reflected:

My brother Eyasu left for Libya to reach Europe with his friends. One Saturday night I was watching a soccer game with my friends. Someone called me on Eyasu's phone, which [he had left] with me. They asked if I was Eyasu and I told them I was a neighbor who had borrowed his phone. I did not want to say who I was before I learned who was calling. They asked if I had seen [Eyasu's] picture on Facebook. I left the house and went to the nearby shop. I asked them to check what had been posted on Facebook on their smart phone. That is when I saw Eyasu and I knew immediately it was him. The person who called, thinking I was someone else, had already told me that Eyasu had been captured and killed by ISIS. This was four years ago. We reported the case to the police. I [testified]. But nothing has happened following my testimony.

In Addis Ababa, families also reported reaching out to mass media to search for missing migrants. Helen is the older sister of Abenezer, who went missing in Libya. She reported the following:

We went to several broadcasting companies such as Fana Television, Ethiopian Television, Josi TV, and Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT). After several times of going back and forth and many appointments, ESAT, the Diaspora-based TV, reported on the case, since at that time many Ethiopians had gone missing in Libya. We [also] heard that the Diaspora raised funds to search for the missing in Libya or to pay [ransoms] in case any of the missing [persons] were alive or found. However, we have yet to receive support or news about our brother. My brother told me he had buried many friends. I think he is [now] dead as well. What can we do if the government does not help? We cannot go to Libya and search for him. We just pray God brings good news to us.

Having exhausted all other options, some interviewees (four family members had traveled to search for missing persons) indicated that on occasion, they had no other option but to embark on separate journeys in an effort to trace the whereabouts of their loved ones, which often implied, however, acquiring additional debt in order to cover smuggling fees. As it is virtually impossible for Ethiopians to obtain visas to travel abroad to search for a loved one or to identify and repatriate their remains, families have no other alternative than pursuing irregular journeys for this purpose. Haile is the brother of Michael, who at the time of the interview had been missing in Libya for three years:

Even my other younger brother has left; he is now in Germany. He is the youngest of all. He decided to leave after [my older brother] Michael went missing. He went to Libya to search for Michael and at the same time to cross to Europe. He spent one year just looking for [Michael] in Libya. Fortunately, he made it to Germany, but he did not find our brother. In Libya he contacted brokers. [He] talked [to] Eritreans in Tripoli and talked to many other people. But no one told him about his brother.

In sum, the interviews indicate that families actively engage in searching for their loved ones, and that they pursue every path available to them if they suspect something has happened to their migrating family member.

The families interviewed for this research recounted the challenges that they faced when interacting with state officials about their missing loved ones and provided suggestions and appeals for changes that could help them tackle some of the challenges described earlier.

While the relationship between families and smugglers must not be romanticized, the interviews revealed that many families were more likely to trust

smugglers over authorities when it came to solutions or information about their missing ones. This reality is explained by this mother of a missing migrant:

We don't know which state institution is responsible to offer information regarding missing migrants. I don't know where to go or whom to ask in the government. Secondly, it is impossible to go to the country where [my son] went missing because I can't afford that. What I can do is to get news from the *delala* (broker) who facilitated his journey. Though I am very disappointed in the *delaloch* (brokers), I have never thought to accuse them [of my son's disappearance] also because most of them are my relatives. Also, I am scared to go to the government office because I have heard of families who sent their children through illegal ways and who were arrested and thrown into jail. Thus, what I can do is keep praying, hoping that one day my God may herald me with good news.

What is more, Ethiopian migrants often go missing or die in places such as the Sahara Desert, the Sinai Desert and in Libya, or they get drowned into the Mediterranean Sea. The evidence connected to specific people is not collected or catalogued by any entity, nor is it communicated to relatives. There is therefore a need for a systemized documentation and cataloguing of evidence that could allow for the eventual identification of a missing person.

Families also raised the issue of obtaining visas to travel to other countries to search for missing loved ones. There are no special visas issued for the purpose of carrying out a search for humanitarian reasons and obtaining a tourist or medical visa involves a highly bureaucratic and financially unaffordable and inaccessible process for most Ethiopian families. The fact that many disappearances are believed to take place in locations in conflict also compromises the safety of grieving families, who still on occasion (and documented in this research) embark on journeys with the hope of finding information concerning their loved ones. Therefore, the ability to travel safely, legally and in a dignified manner for families searching for their missed relatives has to be supported by the responsible bodies.

Lastly, families indicated that in the event that the remains of their loved one were found, the repatriation process and its cost reduce the possibility that they could be buried according to tradition. As described above, many families are already in debt and impoverished as a result of having to pay smuggling and ransom fees, and therefore cannot access additional money from local lenders to cover repatriation costs. Mechanisms that allow for the dignified repatriation of loved ones are therefore urgently needed.

b. Gendered impacts of a loss

Migrants' deaths and disappearances, and the searches that they result in, have different impacts on men and women. Since most missing and disappeared migrants

are men, it is often the women who stay behind (wives, sisters, and mothers), the ones who perform tasks related to the search, and who most often carry a disproportionate amount of social and financial responsibility.

Among families in Hadiya, the ambiguity and the uncertainty that come with the loss of a family member, carry deep social meaning. It also has strong gender implications. For instance, the death or disappearance of a husband is often blamed on the wife who stayed behind – her ‘bad luck’ having led to the outcome. Widows are often mistreated, not only by their relative in-laws, but also by the community at large. The wife of a man who died on his migration journey described this as follows:

Truly, this is the worst moment of my life. I don't know why God tempted me. His (her husband's) relatives frequently blame me because they assume that my husband is dead as a result of my 'bad luck'. In our community, it is very common to blame wives [whenever something wrong happens to their husbands]. That is heartbreaking.

Unable to legally demonstrate that her husband had died, or to obtain a death certificate recognized by the community and state institutions, a woman cannot claim ownership of the properties belonging to her husband and her children cannot apply for state support or legally claim inheritance. The interviewed women indicated that wives of missing migrants do not only face the emotional trauma of not knowing the fate of their husbands, but they also face legal challenges because of their ambiguous marital status. Women also face stigma if they decide to leave the family home or to remarry, as both actions are perceived as betrayal of a deceased or missing husband and his family. If women decide not to remarry, they are likely to face severe economic challenges impacting on their ability to care for themselves and their children, especially if they were reliant on their husbands' income for survival.

The wife of a missing migrant described her legal challenges and lack of independence this way:

I can't talk about property or inherit the land before I get proof of the death of my husband. According to the tradition, his brothers control the land. I can't go to the courts and get into a fight with his relatives. If they farm the land and give some food to my children, that is fine. I can't go against tradition and fight over inheritance. Land disputes are serious problems in this village. People kill each other over land conflicts. I live with his relatives. I depend on them ... everything is difficult for me.

Asserting ownership over farming land after the death of a husband is complicated for rural women in many parts of southern Ethiopia (see Hussein, 2014). Although national laws recognize women's equal rights to access and control property (including land), community law and tradition still prevent them from inheriting

and controlling farming land in rural areas. In many communities, the ownership of land is given only to husbands at the time of marriage and the rights of women to inherit land is not recognized.

c. The burden of debt

Another aspect with deeply gendered implications is the issue of debt. Migrants often acquire significant debt in order to cover the costs of their journeys. Many others depart already indebted, for reasons ranging from the costs of household expenses, family illnesses, or even the smuggling fees for other family members. However, even in the event of someone's death or disappearance, their debt is not canceled, and many times in Hadiya the responsibility to cover financial obligations fall on migrants' wives if a husband dies or disappears along migration routes. Given the fact that women are often prevented from assuming control over property or other inherited goods, the debt imposes long-term obligations that limit women's ability to care for themselves, their children, and often other relatives.

A widow who lost her husband during his migration to South Africa explained:

I was left on my own with kids to feed. I was left alone with the debts we acquired to pay for his travel. I would be happy if I got help to pay the debt and save the land we put down as collateral. I want to feed my children. I want to send them to school. But how can I do all this alone? His family should stop blaming me for [my] bad luck. [His disappearance] was not my fault. If they helped me care for these small children I could at least work. His brothers also want to take the land. My problems are many.

Women who lose their husbands or partners encounter difficulties bringing up children on their own. When the death of a missing person has not been confirmed, interviewed women indicated that they were simultaneously expected to continue the search for the missing person as well as to care for family members and children on their own. A widow whose husband disappeared on the route to South Africa explained:

I gave birth four months after my husband left Ethiopia. You can imagine what happened to me. My heart is broken. He was the only one who took care of me and understood me. He farmed the land. I don't know how I am going to raise these kids. I sold everything we had to search for information and to make international calls to his friends, relatives and sometimes to the brokers. We had also borrowed money with a high interest rate from local money lenders to cover his migration costs. Now the money lenders are asking me to pay back as per agreement or they will take the land. Yet, I can't pay their money and the interest. The debt is increasing every year. Initially, we thought that my husband would pay back the money we have taken when he arrived in South

Africa.

Older relatives also face grave challenges as a result of the death or disappearance of their children, especially when they have invested or mortgaged their property or land to finance their journeys. Older mothers and fathers are often left without the economic support that their children were expected to provide in the event their journeys being successful. These losses are compounded when deaths or disappearances involve multiple children in a single family. The father of two missing sons stated:

My sons were my hope. One died during an earlier migration [journey]. The second went to search for him and also to try his luck and reach South Africa. He went missing as well. It was last year when he called after arriving in Malawi. He never called again. I am dying twice: [because] I lost them and [because] I lost hope. They used to help me till and farm the land. They were my pride. They were my hope. I am getting older and weaker. I can't work. I rely on my relatives for agricultural labor, but they can only help me after finishing with their own farming. My farm is ploughed late and cannot produce much yield. In the village children change their families' lives through migration. They buy new houses for their family. They buy oxen to plough the land. Everyone's life changed here after migration to South Africa [started]. But look at my life, which is becoming hell. I cannot even pay the money lender. I am living with debt. My wife is already bedridden.

d. Kidnapping fees and ransom demands

For many years, researchers have written about the phenomenon of kidnapping, especially among Ethiopian migrants and their Diaspora. The term 'kidnapping' in the Ethiopian context has been used broadly not only in reference to the abduction of a person for ransom by a criminal group (Tekalign, 2018), but also to the retention or withholding of a person in transit until a fee for a service is paid to a smuggler or broker (Global Initiative, 2018), or as a form of extortion to be released from detention (Horwood and Forin, 2019). Mass killings of migrants are also often linked to kidnapping cases (Reuters, 2020).

While no specific statistics concerning kidnappings of Ethiopian migrant exist, the ubiquity of testimonies related to these experiences (documented in this study and in other publications) indicates that the potential of a migrant to be subjected to a kidnapping is high – one estimate suggests that one in seven people traveling from the Horn of Africa towards North Africa is likely to be kidnapped (McGregor, 2019; MMC, 2020).

During the interviews, families described kidnappings as a common element of the irregular journeys in all three routes out of Ethiopia. Families often paid ransoms (or at least were familiar with this experience from others) to release their relatives

from detention or other forms of confinement, or simply to obtain information on their whereabouts. Paying for smuggling and ransom fees, however, on top of the additional debt acquired to finance a journey, can easily leave a family destitute. Furthermore, the payment of a ransom does not necessarily result in the release of a migrant nor does it generate information about their whereabouts. In fact, most testimonies indicate that despite the payment of a kidnapping fee or ransom, many migrants are never found. The following testimony shows the financial impacts of kidnapping events:

My brother went missing in Libya three years ago. First, he was kidnapped by rebels and they held him hostage with many other Ethiopians. They asked us to pay 12,500 USD. We tried our best to raise money by begging, but could not put together the required amount. We sent 3,000 USD to keep him alive. The criminals shot on his legs and hands. They sent us the video of him squirming and photos by Imo and WhatsApp [both instant-messaging apps]. For a year we begged in many places and in public. We were unable to [come up] with the money. Then the criminals switched off their phone. Our brother has been missing since. It has been three years now. I think they killed him. My mother does not want to think he was killed. She insists that we keep searching. We went from office to office and even contacted the Libyan embassy here in Addis Ababa. We got nothing. Many families became poor after paying ransom money to criminals. My brother's friend was kidnapped by another criminal group in Libya at the same time. The criminals asked the family to send 50,000 USD. His family sold their house and sent 40,000 USD to save their son. But their son has also been missing in Libya for three years. Many families in our neighborhood (Qirqos) have become poor since they borrowed money to pay the delala (smuggler) who facilitated the migration to Libya and then sold their houses to pay the ransom money for kidnapers and then ultimately lost their sons. They have lost everything.

e. Mental and physical health impacts of loss

The interviews, and field observations attest to the deep psychological impacts related to the loss, disappearance or death of a loved one in the context of migration. Most families interviewed indicated they had been unable to establish whether their missing loved ones were dead or alive, leading them to experience ambiguous loss, which occurs when there is no clear closure or reason (Boss 1999; Vogt, 2018). As a result of their loved ones' disappearance, family members indicated that they experienced a vast range of physical, psychological and behavioral issues ranging from anxiety, depression, hopelessness, stress, sadness and loneliness to sleep disturbance, inability to focus, loss of appetite and paralysis. Families also reported having relatives who attempted suicide following the disappearance or death of a migrant, overcome by the regret of having encouraged or even pressured a migrating family member to

undertake risky migration journeys.

The mother of a missing young woman explained her grief:

I am really worried about my daughter. I can't stop thinking about her. I don't know what I am going to do. My hopes and dreams left with her. Sometimes I talk to myself just like a mad woman. I have long waited to see her face. But my wishes remain a daydream. Every day I pray, hoping to get her back alive. Whenever someone knocks at my door I run, hoping that will be my daughter who has come back. I know she is not dead because I see her in my dreams. My heart always tells me she is alive.

Similarly, the father of a missing man explained:

As time goes on, our pain and suffering worsen. I can't work in my farm effectively because [I can see] the face of my son again and again. As a result, I can't even fulfill the basic needs of my family. I don't sleep at night. His voice and image come to my mind every minute. His mother had a heart attack after she heard of his disappearance.

Testimonies clearly demonstrate the multidimensional emotional and psychological challenges families experience due to the loss of their loved ones. As time goes by, the emotional pain increases, having material implications in the everyday lives of families, leading at times even to the loss of livelihoods and personal wellbeing.

The state and missing migrants: Legal and institutional frameworks

a. Legal frameworks

The Ethiopian state has ratified some of the relevant laws to prevent people disappearing in different contexts and to protect their rights, such as the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and specific provisions of the 1949 Geneva Conventions (GC I-IV) and their two Additional Protocols of 1977 (AP I and AP II). However, Ethiopia has not ratified the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights. Domestically the Civil Code (art 153-174), the Criminal Code, and Proclamations 1178/2020 and 923/2016 stipulate relevant laws in preventing missing persons, management of dead and detained populations or procedures of arrest. However, the law has serious gaps in specifically dealing with missing persons. There is a lack of clear definitions of a missing person, a family and disappearance. There is no a clear procedure on how the searching can be initiated and who is responsible for the prevention of people disappearing.

Proclamation 1178/2020 strives to prevent people going missing due to

irregular migration while Proclamation 923/2016 has provisions to prevent people from disappearing or to repatriate bodies and support victims' families, in particular regarding Ethiopian migrant workers legally deployed as domestic workers abroad. Articles 8–14 of Proclamation 1178/2020 detail the prevention, protection and prosecution procedures regarding human trafficking and smuggling of migrants that cause disappearance and death of migrants during migration processes, including overseas labor deployments. The Overseas Employment Proclamation (No. 923/2016) requires foreign employers to have life and disability insurance for their workers. The proclamation holds private employment agencies (PEAs) and employers liable for the welfare of their (Ethiopian migrant) employees.

Despite this legislation, there are no specific directives or ministerial regulations to effectively implement the provisions in the civil code. There is no integrated system for searching for information, or methods for informing the families of persons who have gone missing during migration, or who have died in conflict. Families mostly use their own search mechanisms and strategies to collect information of the missing relatives, due to conflict or due to migration. Law enforcement agents' engagement is often focused on crime detections, investigations and prosecutions of perpetrators. They focus less on searching for missing persons and management of the dead. They have not ensured compliance to IHL with regard to requirements that all persons are protected by the Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions.

There are some domestic laws which are relevant to missing migrants, as these laws prohibit all kinds of human trafficking, including migrants in Ethiopia, domestically and abroad. For example, article 597 (1) of the Revised Criminal Code (Proclamation No.414/2004) imposes penalties for those who engage in human trafficking and provides compensation for victims of trafficking, including families. The Civil Code also states that victims of trafficking, including families, have the right to claim compensation for damages. These laws are generic laws inclusive of all kinds of victims of trafficking, including migrants who died or disappeared within Ethiopia or abroad. The Proclamation on Overseas Employment (No. 923/2016) stipulates that foreign employers must have life and disability insurance for the workers concerned. The Proclamation holds Private Employment Agencies (PEAs) and employers liable for the welfare of (Ethiopian migrant) employees and imposes stringent conditions with regard to the establishment, management and licensing, as well as the operations of PEAs.

While Ethiopia has several national laws related to migration and has adopted and ratified relevant international human and migrant rights conventions, including the Global Compact for Migration, which calls on States to “save lives and establish coordinated international efforts in relation to missing migrants” (UNGA, 2018), there are no specific policies, legal frameworks or institutions in the country that concretely and proactively deal with missing Ethiopian migrants.

b. Institutions, actors and roles

There are government actors – the Office of Attorney General (OAG), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA), Federal police; civil society and community-based organizations – community care coalitions (CCCs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and others available for migration governance in Ethiopia in general and missing migrants in particular. In the absence of clearly mandated government agencies, families of the missing migrants are more likely to interact with non-governmental organizations and community-based associations. For instance, CCCs operate at the *kebele* (village) level and have been effective at mobilizing psychosocial and economic support for destitute families who have lost their loved ones, including relatives who went missing during migration journeys. Thus, community-based associations such as *iddir* and other civil society and church groups can mobilize psychosocial and economic support for families of missing migrants.

In addition, other Diaspora and community-based associations, such as *iddir* and church organizations play a vital role in investigating and collecting data about missing and dead migrants and providing psychosocial and economic support to families left behind in Hadiya district of southern Ethiopia. Families of missing migrants interviewed in this study reported relying on *iddir* and their social networks to obtain information when looking for information about relatives who emigrated using irregular channels. *Iddir* members who reside in South Africa often have contacts with smuggling facilitators, who are often members of these groups themselves in rural areas and who can help search for the missing persons through their contacts along migration routes. Families engage in searching for their missing loved ones primarily through informal channels and networks. They may contact relevant authorities for support with the search. Family members in the Diaspora search through their networks and contact brokers for information.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinates the activities of Ethiopia's diplomatic and consular missions to ensure that the interests and rights of Ethiopians residing abroad are protected. The MFA is mandated to initiate the process to rescue, release and return any Ethiopian, found outside Ethiopia, who is a victim of trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants. The MoLSA oversees the operation of PEAs, monitors the safety of legally deployed Ethiopian migrants in Gulf States and supports the repatriation of the remains of legally deployed migrant workers who died in Gulf States and the Middle East. The Office of Attorney General (OAG) is mandated to prevent, protect, and prosecute crimes related to human smuggling and trafficking in persons, and to support the victims. Law enforcement authorities are mandated to detect crimes related to human trafficking, smuggling, and irregular migration, and to investigate complaints of disappearances filed by families. Ethiopian embassies and consulates overseas may engage in searching for Ethiopian nationals missing abroad and facilitate the repatriation of remains. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also occasionally supports this process.

However, despite the large number of state and non-state institutions engaged in migration governance, very few specifically attend to the dynamic needs of families with missing relatives – including the search processes, the identification and repatriation of remains, and assistance with the legal, economic and social challenges they face as a result of the disappearance. Only a small handful of actors work directly on issues concerning missing migrants and their families, and they largely do so on an ad hoc manner. Besides the intervention of government agencies when legally deployed migrant workers die abroad, or as a reaction to large incidents of death of Ethiopian migrants when there is international media attention or involvement of influential Ethiopian Diaspora groups, there is no formal system in place to search for people who left the country irregularly.

CONCLUSION

Despite the vast size of the Ethiopian Diaspora and many migrants who have gone missing or perished in the context of their migration journeys (at least 4,000 recorded by the IOM's Missing Migrants Project and BOLSA within five years – 2015–2020), the dire needs and challenges that families of the missing face, are not proportionately represented in the policy or legal framework in the country. This is evidenced by the fact that there is not a single official body or institution with a mandate to provide assistance or support to families looking for missing migrants. State actions related to victim support are often ad hoc, and only in response to high profile cases, such as those involving a large number of deportations or deaths.

Even though Ethiopia has several government agencies and proclamations related to migration and the government has ratified important human rights and migration-related international conventions, there is a lack of the technical and financial capacity to tackle the issue of missing and dead migrants. Despite Ethiopia having an increasing number of national laws and resources dedicated to migration management and having adopted and ratified relevant international human and migrant rights conventions, the domestic legal and policy framework does not specifically and directly deal with the phenomenon of missing migrants and the needs and concerns of their families.

The Ethiopian government mobilized resources and established several institutions to manage migration and reduce the risks and violence that migrants encounter at various stages of the migration cycle. There are many achievements in migration governance. However, much of the country's refugee and migration governance and humanitarian support are still donor dependent and their roles are therefore determined by donors' priorities and procedures. There is very limited institutional and organizational support to proactively engage with the issue of migrant deaths and disappearances and that addresses the concerns and challenges of the families left behind. There is serious mistrust between families and the state. The increasing criminalization of smuggling is a barrier to families seeking state support in searching for the missing persons, knowing that they will be interrogated

and asked for information concerning smugglers, rather than their loved ones.

All families who participated in the research experienced psychosocial, economic, cultural and communal challenges, but their needs and priorities also varied across rural and urban settings and the regional government they were dealing with. Therefore, multi-dimensional, evidence-based, community-rooted approaches that better support the families of the missing persons across Ethiopia in the face of deep financial precarity and limited mechanisms of social protection, are urgently needed.

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