Migration in Eritrea: A Brief Account

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Eritrea is a new nation found in the horn of Africa. It borders the Sudan to the north and west, and Ethiopia and Djibouti to the south and southeast, respectively. To the east of the country is the Red Sea. Eritrea is a small country both in terms of absolute land area (126,000 km²) and population size (3.29 million). About 82% of the total population live in the rural areas. Females account for about 52.6% of the total population (and males the rest 49.4%). People have an average life expectancy of 51.6 years. Adult literacy is 38.2% for females and 65.7% for males. Eritrea has a GNP per capita of $200 US (source: UN consolidated inter agency appeal, 2002).

In the historical account, it was colonised by Italy from 1890 until 1941, the British Military Administration was in Eritrea from 1941 until 1952, it was federated with Ethiopia from 1952 until 1962. At last the country became independent in 1991. However, border conflicts with Ethiopia started in 1998.

This study is concerned with migration in Eritrea. It focuses on the broad front of expanding the links between sending and receiving areas of migration. The study focuses as a verification scheme on an attempt to look at migration in its totality in order to give an integrated picture of the whole migration issue. The purpose is to examine the extent and characteristics of migration in Eritrea. It is also an attempt to set forth briefly the socio-economic and psychological factors which have given rise to the problem. It is argued that the failure to reduce the problems related to migration will affect negatively the path of reconstruction and economic development in the country.

International migration today is one of the burning issues of the decade. As the world reached the globalisation period, the topic of migration has come into the limelight. Today many Africans are moving from their place of origin to other countries. As a result, ‘brain drain’ is very much in action. It hits the African economy hard. For example, each year the brain drain costs Africa $4 billion US. Each year 20,000 qualified professionals migrate to the western countries (D. Arredo 2002.). Some of the causes of this huge brain drain are higher wages, unprecedented advances in information technology and communication techniques as well as the predominance of western culture and values. Migration, both internal and international, has been broadly classified according to the force activating the movement. Within each type of movement the migrants are either innovating or conservative. Innovating migrants wish to achieve something new. Conservative migrants hope to retain their way of life by moving from an environment that has changed. Eritrean migrants fit in these two categories.
GENERAL ACCOUNT OF ERITREAN MIGRANTS

Until recently migration was considered by economists to be of secondary importance. But nowadays, it has practically shaken development economists to see it as a most significant factor in the development process. African countries’ populations represent 10% of the world population. However, the number of African migrants equals 50 million which is equal to 30% of all migrants in the world. The official number of all Africans living in Europe is about 3,300,000. Partly this migration is due to economic survival within the economic gap between poor and rich countries. On the other side remittances of migrants reach up to 20 to 25 % of the total GDP.

The decision to migrate is done in almost a scientific manner within each family, where according to the division of labour in the family, one member has to remain at home, while another has to search for new financial resources. Everyone in the family recognizes that role and sees how important it is to transfer resources, money or in-kind, and is able to create a transitional economic space in the family. Therefore, almost every Eritrean family has a family member in the Diaspora, which is no longer a rhetorical or abstract vision but a fundamental part of the Eritrean economy.

Eritrea has become an important source of out-migration. The scale of migration has increased after the Socialist Ethiopian Government (Derg) came to power (1975). The volume of migration is grossly underestimated; for example, figures don’t account for illegal or temporary migrants. It is estimated that there are over 720,000 formally registered and 350,000 illegal and unregistered Eritreans abroad. Today the number of Eritrean migrants living abroad has reached over a million. This movement of labour away from Eritrea is of crucial significance in the economic development of the country. A high demand for labour from the oil exporting Arab countries has left Eritrea with a severe shortage of skilled and unskilled labour. Migration to the Middle East, Africa, Europe and the USA is a common practice among hundreds and thousands of Eritreans. Many leave for further education and employment.

Until the beginning of the 1970s, the number of workers leaving Eritrea was not large. But lately there has been a great increase in the demand for labour in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. At the end of the 1980s the number of workers going abroad increased sharply. It should be borne in mind that since then there has been a large number of illegal migrations abroad. The high level of labour export at that time has resulted in severe labour shortages. According to the Department of Labour, in 1980 between 30 to 40,000 Eritrean workers were living in Saudi Arabia. Of these only 10,000 were legally employed. Since then the number of migrant workers has greatly increased. The diverse talent and interests was a factor. The explosive nature of the demand for Eritrean labour can be shown by the fact that over the last three decades exports of Eritrean labour increased immensely.
As far as remittances are concerned, there are advantages and disadvantages. It is undeniable that the migrant labour export has advantages; for example, it is a valuable source of foreign exchange. The departure of migrants can be seen as an effective way of reducing unemployment, the taxes paid by the workers can be helpful, and the remittances sent to the families of the workers can have a positive impact. However, countries like Eritrea have many reservations about the merits of the continuing migrant labour movement on the present scale and nature. They are unhappy about the effect it has on the situation at home. This can be seen not only in the lost productive capacity of migrants during their most active years, but also in the selectivity of the process which “creams off” much of the most able and skilled part of the labour force. This results in many instances in the loss of manpower from the very sectors that are most needed for development. The possible disadvantages for countries like Eritrea is that they have trained their workers at great expense in the skills of the receiving areas. Remittances do not compensate for this lost investment. In fact they tend to fuel domestic inflation in the receiving areas to an extent that could be harmful to internal development. For the ordinary Eritrean remittance at times is a problem, not a solution, because those who receive so much money are indifferent to prices, and this causes prices to rise. It also leads to the weakening of sufficient general acceptance of working life.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS: GENERAL STRATIFICATION

In the case of Eritrean migrants we have both the innovating and conservative groups. The latter refers to the large number of migrants that fled the country to conserve their peaceful way of living after the forced federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia. The innovating migrants are the ones who left the country to attain better living standards through getting better jobs and education in their destination countries after the independence of the country from Ethiopia. After independence, in the period between 1994 and 1998 about 443,243 people emigrated out of Eritrea. These migrants’ motives in moving out of Eritrea were most probably the search for better living conditions abroad compared to what they had in their home country. Between 1999 and 2003 about 268,942 people migrated out of Eritrea. The majority of those people made their way to the Sudan owing to the war with Ethiopia in the country. Between the years of 1994 and 2003 a large number of people (approximately 20% of the total population) migrated out of Eritrea. About 55% of this number emigrated in the four years between 1994 & 1997 inclusive. The rest, 45%, emigrated out of Eritrea in the 6 years between 1998 and 2003 inclusive. This shows that the war with Ethiopia in 1998 slowed down the emigration rate. However, after 1998 year by year the emigration rate speeded up.
until in 2002 it surpassed the before the war peak of 100,704 individuals in 1996. Most of the migrants’ destinations were Ethiopia, Sudan, Europe and the Middle East. The Middle East has for quite a long period of time been a favorite destination for many people emigrating from Eritrea. This is due to the region’s proximity and also due to strong cultural and religious ties between the Eritrean people and the Arab world. Until recently job availability in Middle Eastern countries was an important attracting factor for migrants. Similarly the historical and cultural commonalities between the people of Eritrea and the people of both Ethiopia and Sudan were the main factors that contributed to the mass emigration to the Sudan and (before the war of 1998) to Ethiopia. Between 1994 and 1999 there was increased migration to Ethiopia (from 20,878 individuals in 1994 to 50,709 in 1997) while that to the Sudan was declining to reach only 339 individuals in 1999 as compared to 51,133 in 1994. However after 1999 migration to the Sudan rose rapidly to reach 57,216 individuals in 2002 as compared to the figure of 339 in 1999. These figures could be explained by the large numbers of displaced persons that fled the war and made their way to the Sudan. The emigration rates to Europe and the USA did not show big fluctuations for the years between 1994 and 2003, although as in the other regions their figures dropped in 1998 (the average annual emigration rates were 3,629 persons to the USA and 10,453 persons to Europe).

Tab. 1 - Migrants in countries as percentage of their respective continents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% by Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sudan and Ethiopia (Total % from Africa)</td>
<td>98.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia and Yemen (Total % from M.East)</td>
<td>90.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA and Canada (% from total migrants)</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (% from Europe)</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy (% from Europe)</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain (% from Europe)</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavia countries (% from Europe)</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Migration and Nationalities, 2003, Asmara, Eritrea.

In looking at the potential remittance levels of different regions, it is imperative that we make some rearrangements of the statistics. As far as remittances are concerned, there has traditionally been no or meager remittances from people in the Sudan and Ethiopia. So while these two countries hold a big proportion of Eritreans outside of the country (63.13% of the total migrants between 1994 and 2003) they have low remittance levels to the home country,
thus pulling the average remittance level down wards. So by isolating these two countries in the analysis we can get a picture of the potential remitter migrants. It should be noted that of all Eritrean migrants between the years of 1994 and 2003 approximately 53.6% had a destination of Europe or the USA (13.8% to the U.S and 39.80% to Europe). Taking for granted that these regions are the ones with higher income the remittance level from this group is obviously high. Community organized groups like the “Adetat Adi Tilyan” have traditionally made great contributions to the home country even before independence, and still their contributions and remittances are continuous. Taking our nearby region, the Middle East, there were about 104,529 migrants between 1994 and 2003. This equals 39.80% of total emigrants between these years (again isolating the figures of the Sudan and Ethiopia). This group has a fairly high level of money remittances accompanied by a large level of material remittances.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>% age of mig.</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Afri Ctrs.</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>64.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>0.2 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Dep. of Migration and nationalities, Asmara, Eritrea 2003.

Destinations of Eritrean migrants

Migration from Eritrea to the Gulf countries up until recent years is easy to account for; the linguistic unity and culture has intensified and simplified migration in both receiving and sending areas. It is clear that since the middle of the 1970s the Arab oil producing countries have depended on labour imports from neighboring countries like Eritrea. Initially, migration of Eritreans started as early as the 1940s and 1950s with the rise of Sudanese independence. During this period Sudan had a stable economy and Eritrean migrants
were living comfortably and were absorbed with no difficulty. From that time up until the 1980s Sudan had a strong currency which had been useful for Eritrean migrants to remit back home to Eritrea. Later, in the 1970s Sudan became the center for migration transition as well as the escape route from the war and destruction that occurred in Eritrea at that time.

Migration in Eritrea has escalated in 1980s due to the escalation of the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. A number of Eritreans fled to the Sudan. So Sudan was the center for transition for almost 80% of Eritreans in the Diaspora. This is simply because of its geographical location and the cultural affinity of the people of the two countries.

There were 400,000 migrants residing in Ethiopia of Eritrean origin. These people were not really remitting to Eritrea in general. In fact the traditional and historical reflection and observation of Eritrean migrants in Ethiopia is related more to naturalization and a change of identity and culture. So Ethiopia can only be the source of consumer exports from Eritrea and not potentially viable for remittances.

Migration to Italy has been going on for over 40 years, i.e. since the 1960s. The migration relationship between the two countries is close and it continues to grow until the present day. There are various reasons or factors which influence the greater and closer relationship between the two countries. These include geographical location, historical trade relations, colonial ties, etc. The above reasons have given rise to the temporary, chain or transitional migration movement from Eritrea. In this case 60% of the Eritrean migrants had passed through Italy, although at the moment the number of Eritreans in Italy only equal 16.5 % the total percentage of those who reside in Europe as migrants.

Eritrean Women migrants: Causes and motives

Women make up an increasing proportion of international migration in the Eritrean context. The proportion of females in foreign countries is now typically between 45 and 50 percent of all migrants. In some cases 70% of the migrants are women, such as Eritrean women in Italy. One of the main determinants for women migrants could be family reunification, i.e. the wife and children joining a male migrant, so that the proportion of females is likely to rise. Secondly, there is an increasing demand of labour for female dominated jobs, such as domestic service, entertainment and service sector jobs in general. Thirdly, the economic conditions in the country mean that women too have to migrate. Finally, Eritrean women may not only migrate for employment abroad but also may want greater freedom and personal fulfilment. In addition the narrow options for marriage may frustrate them in traditional society. Therefore we can say that because of this situation there are more women migrants than are men.
CONCLUSION

The current level of migration in Eritrea is high. It includes mostly those of productive age. The worrying thing about this emigration is that those migrating in large numbers are those who are the most productive categories of the labour force. People of both sexes between the ages of 20 to 40 make up a greater percentage of migrants. Therefore how to make migration benefit the country should be among the priorities of the development policies of the government. To this end the systematic study of migration and its relations with remittances is needed and should be conducted before it is too late.

The main socio-economic consequences of migration in Eritrea are varied and their effect is damaging for sending areas. Some of the main consequences include (economic) labour shortages, inflationary pressures, and brain drain. At the same time on the social side the real consequences include social problems and breakdown of social relations, attitudinal changes, etc.

People will continue to leave, and Eritrea therefore needs to devise ways and means to study and research the subject of migration and its implication for development and reconstruction. There are some policy measures which need to serve as means to ameliorate the impacts of migration and increase the rewards from migration (through remittance levels). In the meantime the government needs to encourage a sense of participating in two cultures, rather than one, and to use every means of communication to draw on the diaspora’s skills and contacts. In other words, Eritrea needs to develop a number of networks that link the country together with Diaspora researchers, scientists, and students, such as the Eritrea community network, etc.

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