

Eritrea's Youth Migration Challenge: The Role of Aspirations and Opportunity

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Abstract

Over the last decade, Eritrea has received significant analyses from the mainstream media and some scholars, due to the mass international migration of its citizens, estimated at 5,000 individuals monthly, especially youth. The aim of this paper is to explore factors that explain the mass migration of Eritrean youth, with a focus on the potential roles of aspirations and opportunities. Much of the literature suggests that young Eritreans are emigrating due to their country's national service program. We analyse the literature on the factors driving Eritrean youth migration vis-à-vis push factors for migration from sub-Saharan Africa. Based on our analysis of various bodies of work related to Eritrean migration and aspirations, we conclude that three main factors explain youth migration from Eritrea: 1) tensions between individual and national aspirations; 2) limited opportunities for transition from education to employment; and 3) limited rights and freedoms.

Keywords Capability, national service, national aspirations, transitions.

Introduction

Eritrea is a small sovereign state in the Horn of Africa comprised of an estimated five million citizens (Tessema & Ng'oma, 2009). Despite its small population, in recent years, Eritrea has gained wide global attention for being one of the largest sources of international migrants to countries in Europe through Mediterranean routes (Rosberg & Tronvoll, 2017). Most of these migrants are youth, particularly young men (Rosberg & Tronvoll, 2017). Many studies suggest that Eritrea's compulsory national service is the main driver of mass migration from the country (Hirt & Mohammad, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2014; Kibreab, 2014, 2017). Yet, others argue that the absence of a general sense of religious, economic and political freedom, the lack of economic opportunities and a sense of hopelessness are drivers of mass migration (Rosberg & Tronvoll, 2017; Tessema & Ng'oma, 2009)

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Some context is relevant here. Eritrea became an independent country in 1991 following a protracted three-decade period of conflict with Ethiopia (International Crisis Group, 2010). During its early post-independence years, the country seemed to be moving along an economically strong developmental trajectory, particularly with its post-war reconstruction and development program that partly focused on self-sufficiency (Tesfagiorgis, 1993). In the referendum that resulted in the country's separation from Ethiopia, citizens voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence, and the outcome inspired an era of hope (International Crisis Group, 2010). This hope also defined the citizens' aspirations for themselves and their country. The hope was expressed by the Eritrean diaspora, some of whom returned, while others invested in the country with the intention of contributing to its advancement (Hirt, 2014, 2015). This hope, which was translated into solidarity and support, continued even in the years following the suspension of the constitutional process, the renewed war with Ethiopia and the post-war era, through the diaspora tax system instituted by the state (Hirt, 2014). Perhaps due to these factors, Eritrea's economy boomed in the first decade following independence with an average annual economic growth rate of 4.5%. However, the renewed conflict with Ethiopia and the state's response to it, contributed to a period of destabilisation with negative consequences for the economy (Lopez & Venkataraman, 2006).

Following the conflict, Eritrea's economy experienced a short period of decline after the mid-2000s, and then improved, with an increase in GDP growth from 2.2% in 2010 to 8.2% in 2011. In the following years, the economy was in decline for a sustained period, with a reported GDP growth of 0.3% in 2015 (Rosberg & Tronvoll, 2017). The most recent GDP growth, in 2017, was 3.4% and is projected to be 3.7% in 2018 (African Development Bank, 2018). While the government has prioritised investments in infrastructure, such as communication facilities, water supply, energy and agriculture, the impact of these have been severely dwarfed by higher investments in security (AfDB Group, OECD & UNDP, 2016). Eritrea's economic prospects have also been negatively affected by UN sanctions and an unstable macroeconomic environment. The World Bank (2017) speculates that poverty in Eritrea may be as high as 65% to 80% in rural areas. A significant portion of employment opportunity in Eritrea is in 'rain-fed' agriculture, which contributes only a small portion of the GDP (African Development Bank, 2018). Although the youth unemployment rate is relatively low at 13%, when compared to other African countries, such as South Africa (over 50%), this is masked by the large number of people who are working poor, earning less than US\$2 a day

(Research and Evidence Facility, 2017). Youth constitute around 30% of the overall Eritrean population and they are relatively well educated, with an overall literacy rate of 90%, which makes them an important group to study.

The last two decades have witnessed a mass exodus of Eritreans migrating to neighbouring countries, mainly Sudan and Ethiopia, as well as far-off countries in Europe. By some estimates (Horwood & Hopper, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2014), at least 5,000 Eritreans leave the country monthly, and they constitute the second largest number of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in Europe. More than 500,000 people were estimated to have left the country as of 2013, and around a 250,000 refugees from Eritrea are scattered globally (Connell, 2013). There were 48,400 asylum applications from Eritreans in Europe in 2014, more than doubling the 22,300 recorded in 2013. This made Eritrea the fifth largest producer of asylum seekers (UN OHCHR, 2015). In the UK alone, there were over 3,700 Eritrean asylum seekers in 2013. Although the Eritrean situation has recently gained attention in the context of the current migration crisis in Europe, one question that requires more exploration is why young people are emigrating *en-masse* from the country. The aim of this paper is to explore the factors that drive youth migration from Eritrea. Different push and pull factors explain migration. Some of the factors identified in the literature include: economic migration, migration for family reasons and environmental conditions, including policies and conflict (Cummings et al., 2015; European Communities, 2000; Flahaux & de Haas, 2016). Much of the literature suggests that young Eritreans are migrating due to the country's national service program (Rosberg & Tronvoll, 2017). In this paper, we analyse the literature on the factors driving Eritrean youth migration using a lens of opportunities and aspirations. We review bodies of work related to aspirations, economic opportunity and factors that drive migration, both specifically related to Eritrea and beyond. Using combinations of search terms – such as 'youth AND migration AND Eritrea OR Africa', 'youth AND migration AND Eritrea AND push factors' and 'youth AND migration AND Eritrea AND push forced migration', among others – we searched major databases, such as EBSCOHOST and Google Scholar, and identified various studies that have analysed the challenge of migration from Eritrea. In this paper, we critically review these studies, and discuss their conclusions for why youth migrate. While not a systematic review, we apply the critical angle offered by the systematic review methodology by attempting to answer the research question: why do youth migrate or seek to migrate from Eritrea? Like most studies of Eritrean migration, our paper faces limitations of internal

validity due to the lack of primary data and a review of studies that are mainly based on data collected from outside of Eritrea (Rosberg & Tronvoll, 2017).

This paper is divided into five sections. Following this brief introduction, we elaborate on a conceptual framework that draws on the concepts of aspirations and opportunity. In this section, we discuss Amartya Sen's (1993, 1999) capability approach as an underlying framework to explain the push factors that drive youth migration from Eritrea. In the third section, we discuss the distinction between national aspirations and individual aspirations. We opine that national aspirations are often couched in terms of state aspirations, and that these can be inconsistent with the aspirations of citizens. In the fourth section, we discuss the main findings of the review, outlining three key factors that explain youth migration from Eritrea: tension between individual and national aspirations, limited opportunities to transition from education to employment and limited rights and freedoms of citizens. In the fifth section, we discuss these factors and their relationship with the wider literature on migration from sub-Saharan African contexts. Furthermore, we consider the policy relevance of the main conclusions drawn for Eritrea.

Conceptual Framework: Capability, Aspirations and Opportunity

Push and pull factors that drive African migration are often linked to economic and environmental factors (Cummings et al., 2015; European Communities, 2000). Although the literature has focused more extensively on international migration, the bulk of African migration occurs within the region (Adepoju, 2000; Flahaux & de Haas, 2016). However, whether movement occurs within the region or internationally, economic factors are central drivers of voluntary and involuntary or forced migration (Awumbila, 2017). The factors that drive forced migration and increasing rates of displacement in Africa have been the subject of several studies (Dejesus, 2018; Erdal & Oeppen, 2018; Rwamatwara, 2005). However, an aspect of migration in the region that requires further exploration, and which this paper aims to address, is the intersection of factors that drive forced migration and those that drive voluntary migration. Scholars have noted this as an important area of study that does not entirely fit the binaries of forced versus voluntary migration, and the nuances of its dimensions require closer consideration (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). By 'looking deeper', the contribution of aspirations and opportunity, whether in the context of forced or voluntary migration, become clearer (Carling & Collins, 2018). We attempt to develop a conceptual framework that analyses the factors that drive Eritrean youth migration using the capability approach, and

the concepts of aspirations and opportunity, to develop a deeper understanding of mass youth migration from post-independence Eritrea.

The Capability Approach

The capability approach (CA) is a framework for analysis that elucidates understandings of individual potential for achievement, social arrangements and their contributions and effects on people's lives (Robeyns, 2005). This framework is valuable to the design of effective policies that could promote and enhance social change in society (Robeyns, 2005). At the core of the CA is the view that analyses of policies and people's lives should focus on both the possibilities that they have (the things that they have the potential to be and do) and those that they are actually able to achieve (Sen, 1993). Sen describes the CA in terms of human freedoms, the possibility to be and do the things that contribute to the achievement of a good life (Sen, 1999). Central to the CA are agency and freedom, both of which advance the notion that a person's ability to pursue the life that he or she desires unhindered by institutional structures and social arrangements is crucial for human development and the advancement of a society (Sen, 1993).

Scholars have argued that commodities and material possessions are means to a good life (Clark, 2005). People's ability to achieve the ends they desire, and ultimately live a good life, is dependent on the kinds of societies in which they live, their personal situations and the resources that are available to enable them to achieve their desired ends. Scholars have long debated the role of social and cultural environments on people's ability to aspire to certain achievements (Appadurai, 2004; Bourdieu, 1986). Sen's conception of the CA has given rise to several analyses of both human development and wellbeing, and it has been instrumental to providing a social justice frame when exploring aspects of human rights and justice in several development topics, such as education (Tikly, 2013). In taking the approach forward, Nussbaum (2005) argues for a set of central capabilities that should form the basis of national constitutions and statutes. Nussbaum's (2005) list of central capabilities is comprised of ten areas of human life, namely: life, health, bodily integrity, sense, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reasons, affiliations, relationship to the world of nature and control over environment. The list illustrates many aspects that people consider to constitute a good life, and which are central to their aspirations.

In a study using a CA framework in South Africa, Clark (2003) found issues such as jobs, happiness, a good family, living a Christian (religious) life, among

others, to be central to how participants defined the good life. Sen (1985) also gives examples of capabilities, such as the ability to be well nourished, to appear in public without shame and to live a long and healthy life. Underlying the CA is the understanding of human dignity and a life that is free to flourish. The United Nations Development Program has produced a human development report since 1990 as a major indicator of human progress, in which it presents a composite measure comprised of life expectancy, income and literacy, based in part on the capability approach. If capabilities are by any means universal, as Nussbaum (2005) seems to suggest, then it could be argued that the failure to achieve the things that matter the most to people, or their inability to achieve these due to structural constraints, could have an impact on their perception of life in that society and affect their decision to migrate.

Aspirations and Opportunity

As explained earlier, the potential of Eritrean youth, like those in other sub-Saharan African countries, to achieve their aspirations, and the sense of hope derived from the freedom to both aspire and pursue their aspirations, could be important elements for an understanding of youth migration (Mains, 2013). Aspirations provide an interesting lens for understanding the link between migration and young people's sense of the possibilities they have for their lives (Kleist, 2017). As Mains (2013) suggests in his analysis of Ethiopian youth aspirations, when "hope is cut" international migration tends to be one of the options that young men choose, given their perception of the possibilities that they could have abroad, which is largely fed by the media and the version of a better life portrayed by returnees. The possibilities that young people aspire to range from acquiring commodities such as money and other material possessions, to the desire for higher education or long-term personal relationships, such as being happily married (Clark, 2003). An aspiration is defined as "the perceived importance or necessity of goals" (Copestake & Camfield, 2010: 618). It is a set of desired end-states that an individual seeks to achieve (Kruglanski & Kopetz, 2009). Aspirations are cognitive and do not always match a person's realities. This dissonance often contributes to individuals acting in different ways to enhance the potential of achieving their aspirations.

The desired states that youth work towards achieving are important determinants of the ways in which they plan and live their lives. In Eritrea, studies and project reports have shown that young people aim to attain the good life through quality education, vocational training and entrepreneurship

(Müller, 2004; Riggan, 2016). However, their abilities to achieve these goals are often impeded by the lack of proper institutional arrangements to advance or enable the attainment of these aspirations and limited opportunities for employment. The lack of such institutional arrangements and structures constitute both a disincentive to their aspirations and a major impediment to their capacity to pursue a better life. As such, many youth are compelled to either align with the limited opportunities that exist or seek other opportunities abroad by emigrating (Riggan, 2016). As a case in point, the Eritrean education system is highly restrictive in terms of the options that youth seeking to enter higher education, particularly universities, are able to pursue, as these are determined by the states' pre-determined human capacity needs rather than by the interests of the youth themselves (Müller, 2004, 2015). An area of interest is the effect that restricted opportunities for Eritrean youth to choose what they value could have on their decision to migrate internationally.

Riggan's (2016) research based on classroom debates on migration highlights the effects of limited opportunities on aspirations in Eritrea. While some students participating in the debate highlight the need to stay to rebuild their country, others note that, given the structural weaknesses, the lack of opportunities to receive good quality education and the desire to have a livelihood, emigration was a more viable option. Not all of Riggan's participants were in favour of emigrating. Some of the participants highlighted the value of patriotism and national development as important reasons to stay in the country (Riggan, 2016). The above is consistent with an analysis by Rosberg and Tronovoll (2017) in which 88% of the respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that improving their standard of living was an important driver of their decision to migrate. The same study cites the economy of Eritrea as one of the external factors that drive migration from the country. Cummings et al. (2015) highlight that the absence of economic opportunities in a country and perception of opportunities in other countries are important determinants of the decision to emigrate.

In analysing the mass migration of youth from Eritrea, it is crucial to understand what youth have reason to value, the impact of social arrangements on the things that they can aspire to and achieve, how policies affect their potential for achieving the things that they value and what types of changes in Eritrean society and political life are necessary (Carling & Collins, 2018). An important factor that implicitly informs analyses on the quality of people's lives in Eritrea is the extent to which citizens have the freedom to

pursue the things that they value (Kibreab, 2014). This informs extensive critiques of the national service program, given that it is perceived as an infringement on people's ability to pursue the kind of life they value (Kibreab, 2017). The notions of freedom and agency as advanced by CA are not only useful for understanding what other possibilities or opportunities youth have within Eritrea itself, but also how the perception of local opportunities compared to those outside drive mass youth movement. We are interested in potential explanations offered by perceived opportunities or the lack thereof for the mass migration of Eritrean youth. An important aspect of this relates to the ways in which the aspirations of Eritrean youth interact with those of the state. Thus, the question of national versus individual aspirations is briefly discussed in the following section.

Individual versus National Aspirations

National aspirations reflect the vision of the state, as represented by its political leadership, for a country's future. The perception of the future could be in terms of human development (education and health), security, welfare, infrastructure or other such areas that are of interest to a given country as perceived by the leadership. In the case of Eritrea, these priorities were set at the post-independence conference (Tesfagiorgis, 1993). National aspirations are sometimes driven by the ideological leaning of a country's political leadership, as well as other factors, such as the culture of a country and the extent to which citizens' perspectives are integrated into policies. National aspirations are often reflected in national constitutions, legislations, policies, development plans and programmes instituted by the government of a country. For instance, in the case of access to education and courses, the system in Eritrea is designed to train manpower for the country's workforce under its self-reliance programme and based on what the state prioritises (Ministry of Education, 2008; Müller, 2015). National aspirations are useful for countries as they are important determinants of growth, development and prosperity. Yet, they could either enhance the attainment of personal aspirations or hinder them. Although there are instances in which they are aligned, in many cases national aspirations may differ from those of the generality of citizens, which can establish a clear distinction between state aspirations and collective or group aspirations (Shapiro, 1999).

Often national aspirations are cast in the form of acts of patriotism on the part of citizens, or simply developed as requirements for transition from one phase of life to another. For example, following Nigeria's protracted civil war of the 1960s–70, a new national youth service program was established that

required all young citizens to undertake a year-long engagement on national duty, in a state other than their own and in a different part of Nigeria to that in which they studied (Obadare, 2005, 2011). While the service is designed as a reflection of the state to achieve cohesion, and prevent future conflict, this may not reflect the aspirations of young graduates, some of whom may prefer to directly transition into full-time waged work or self-employment.

In the context of Eritrea, the national aspiration of producing manpower for the state-sanctioned sectors may constitute a similar challenge (Kibreab, 2014, 2017). School to work transition in Eritrea is an important aspect of the intersection between aspirations and opportunity because for most young people who attain higher education, they will be one of a handful of people who make it to that educational level (Müller, 2004). This is because there are limited opportunities for entry into higher education in Eritrea, and the system is largely controlled by the state. Despite the tight control of the higher education system, at least 13% of the youth remain unemployed. Given the weak economy, the prospects of graduates to enter decent waged employment is highly limited, despite this being a stated objective of the government's higher education policy (Ministry of Education, 2008). School to work transition studies underscore the need to remove barriers to young people's access to post-study opportunities for personal development and livelihood (Fares et al., 2005). Often, young people's development, aspirations and attainment are affected by false starts and limited opportunities for achievement of their goals (Locke & TeLintelo, 2012). While individual achievement is a critical aspect of development, the role of structural factors in shaping people's life outcomes cannot be overstated. In analysing Eritrea's higher education system, Müller (2015) highlights what was pointed out earlier in this article: that institutional arrangements hinder students' higher education aspirations.

Another representation of national aspiration in Eritrea is the country's national service program. The Eritrean national service programme was first proclaimed by the Provisional Government of Eritrea in 1991 following the eviction of Ethiopian forces by the EPLF (Kibreab, 2017). The program was envisaged as part of efforts to enhance national unity, cohesion and enhancement of Eritrea's self-reliance policy (Kibreab, 2017). Beyond that, the program could be viewed as a strategy to enhance youth employability and, thus, the productivity of the Eritrean economy. Under the programme, young Eritreans completing high school were required to complete one year of paramilitary training, and were posted to government ministries and

businesses to undertake internship-like assignments (Kibreab, 2017). Although the national service was originally designed to last a period of eighteen months, following which individuals could pursue their preferred life trajectories, it is now claimed by various sources that this has been extended and could last for up to ten years or indefinitely (Kibreab, 2014, 2017). National service conscripts are assigned to fulfil a broad set of tasks, going beyond core military functions to include work in the development, construction and maintenance of public infrastructure, agriculture and in the fledgling industrial and mining sectors (UN OHCHR, 2015).

From the perspective of the State, the national service program is designed to help meet certain national aspirations: to protect state sovereignty, facilitate cohesion and prepare youth for future employment. However, given the resistance to the program as seen in the number of deserters and those seeking to emigrate to escape participation (Hirt, 2010), it appears that the state's objective or aspiration and those of the young people, at best, are misaligned and, at worst, are clashing.

Why are Young Eritreans Migrating?

In this section, we discuss our findings on the factors that influence youth migration from Eritrea, based on our review of the literature. We opine that youth migration from Eritrea is intricately linked to young Eritreans' aspirations and factors that enable or impede them. Contrary to the dominant narrative presented in the literature that youth migration is primarily a result of the national service (Connell, 2012; Kibreab, 2013), we suggest that a complex mix of factors encapsulated by the absence of opportunities contribute to migration.

Tensions between National (State) and Individual Aspirations

It is sad, but true, to say that Eritrea has no economy today, devastated as it is by the thirty years of war and deliberate scorched-earth policy. In addition to the war, the manpower and economic resources of the country have been depleted by recurrent drought and other natural calamities. As there is virtually nothing, the first priority of the task is to formulate and lay the foundations for an initial economic framework (Isaias Afewerki quoted in Tesfagiorgis, 1993: xxii).

Immediately after the *de facto* independence of Eritrea, a development conference was held in Asmara, the capital city, in June 1991. The aim of the conference was to begin a dialogue to draw out national goals towards the

development of the economy (Tesfagiorgis, 1993). As mentioned in the quote above by Eritrea's President Issaias Afewerki, the country's economy was weak in the aftermath of the war and this made the conference imperative. The conference focused on several themes perceived to hold the potential to galvanise the ailing economy, including agriculture, health, human resource development and gender, and covered seven sectors including economic development, the macroeconomic framework, human resource development, agriculture and environment, finance and banking, trade and industry, natural resource development and construction (Tesfagiorgis, 1993). A popular recommendation from the conference, due to its significance during wartime, was the need to utilise a self-reliance strategy in pursuit of national development goals. A self-reliance strategy is one that is introspective, depending on local human and material resources for economic, social and political advancement (Tesfagiorgis, 1993). This implied the possibility for Eritrea to grow its own food and provide education and healthcare systems without external aid (Habtom, 2016). In the context of international aid, and given that much of the developing world was still grappling with the aftermath of the World Bank/IMF structural adjustment programs at the time, the self-reliance stance was understandable. However, although noble in its objective, this strategy is not without criticism. For example, it has been suggested that the strategy has contributed to the isolation of Eritrea from the rest of the world due to the country's rejection of most international aid (International Crisis Group, 2014).

Overall, the economic and social goals that were defined for the young country during the 1991 conference included developing the education system and health infrastructure, building a strong army, humane treatment of prisoners, maintaining an independent self-reliant and planned national economy, ensuring equality among nationalities and establishing a democratic state (Tesfagiorgis, 1993). There appeared to be a sense of urgency for development and an interest in empowering citizens. The initial national aspirations and strategy stressed the importance of the human capital in Eritrea. Investing in human capital, particularly in education, would have elevated not only the status of individuals but that of the state. However, these aspirations were truncated by the border war with Ethiopia, resulting in a halt in implementation and, in some instances, a discontinuation or regression.

As pointed out earlier, the national service program was an important component of Eritrea's post-independence national aspirations. The national service appears to be a key apparatus for the advancement of its self-reliance

strategy and is a key piece of its effort towards human development as outlined in the President's remarks cited earlier. The service is conceived as a way of preserving war-time values, safeguarding the territorial integrity of Eritrea, and developing man-power for the state's prioritised sectors (Kibreab, 2013). While the national service is the prerogative of the state, as similar programs have been established in Africa and elsewhere, the main critique has been the approach to the program which, as some authors suggest, has now become indefinite (Kibreab, 2014). As pointed out earlier, young citizens are said to resist the programs, applying various forms of agency. Male and female youth devise various strategies to avoid the program, including deserting, emigrating or, on the part of females, getting pregnant as a means to secure exclusion (Amnesty International, 2015; Hirt, 2010).

We deduce from our review that there exists a tension between Eritrea's national development aspirations and the aspirations of its individual citizens both in relation to its post-war development strategy as it relates to its operationalisation of the self-reliance strategy, and the national service program (Rosberg & Tronvoll, 2017). Although Eritrea had grand national aspirations, which are hinged on a vision of self-sufficiency, these national aspirations were not always consistent with those of citizens. For example, while Eritrea sees its national service program as part of a wider process of achieving self-sufficiency, this appears not to be in sync with young people's aspirations. This misalignment is also illustrated by the high number of conscripts who desert and has resulted in migration in some instances to escape the service (Kibreab, 2017). Based on her research on women in university education, Müller (2004) suggests that the country's aspirations in the area of human development appears to have mainly focused on the needs of the state and not the individuals, suggesting that this led to people resisting the country's national aspirations by leaving the country. We suggest that the inadequate focus on individual aspirations is a major contributor to individuals leaving the country, as they do not see their futures reflected in the state's aspirations and therefore do not align with them.

Limited Opportunities for Transition from Education to Employment

As highlighted above, a human capital development strategy was put in place to build human capital and the most fundamental approach to this was education. The human capital strategy did not permit enough room for young people to develop themselves in the ways that they considered important for their lives, as opportunities for study, particularly at higher education level, and work were controlled to a large extent by the state (Dorman. 2005; Müller,

2004). While access to higher education improved overall over the years, there remained fewer options for study in higher education institutions. Education was mentioned as the most important ingredient for economic development in both the initial post-independence development strategy mentioned earlier and subsequent national development policies (Ministry of Education, 2008; Tesfagiorgis, 1993). However, due to constraints, which include a lack of resources, Eritrea has been unable to develop an inclusive higher education system (Müller, 2004; Rena, 2006). Moreover, the agency and voices of students have been proscribed through a policy that essentially restricts student activism within campuses, which led to the closure of the University of Asmara (Hirt, 2017). The goal of Eritrea's national strategies is to provide accessible and free quality education to prepare its youth to contribute to national development, and while overall literacy levels are high, skill levels are substantially lower (Ministry of Education, 2008; Research and Evidence Facility, 2017).

In the immediate post-independence era, there was a sense of satisfaction among the general public about the state's prioritisation of education (Tessema & Ng'oma, 2009). However, as the approach to education and human development in general began to be perceived as impeding individual rights and focusing more on the needs the government, this strategy began to receive less and less support. In addition to concerns over the erosion of human rights was a concern that the education provided, despite being positioned as addressing the employment demand in the country, did not adequately prepare youth for these opportunities (Research and Evidence Facility, 2017). In a study on education in Eritrea, Müller (2004) found that some of the participants felt that their education and training did not match their future goals, because after the year 2000, employment opportunities became fewer and they were expected to work mainly in construction. One participant expressed how service to the country could have been "better" utilised instead of doing construction work. The Eritrean government expresses the value of the nation's human resource, more specifically the young people and that it is highly important that all Eritrean people are equipped with necessary skills and knowledge to protect and develop the nation (Riggan, 2016). Despite the focus on developing manpower, the absorptive capacity of the Ethiopian economy and labour market remains limited.

As mentioned earlier, the Eritrean economy has experienced serious ebbs and flows, peaking at 8.2% GDP growth in 2011, a steep decline to 0.3% in 2015, and a projected incline to 3.7% in 2018 (African Development Bank, 2018;

Rosberg & Tronvoll, 2017). The main economic activities in Eritrea are centred around agriculture, construction and mining (African Development Bank, 2018). However, the market has limited absorptive capacity. Hence, the majority of the national service participants serve in government departments and government businesses. In specific reference to women's employment, scholars have raised concerns regarding access to employment opportunities as well as the relatively low incomes on average (Rena, 2007). The lack of a clear pathway to employment, limited incomes and an overall suppressed economy affects the hope that young people have for the future and forces young people to make decisions to migrate, which they perceive as having the potential to provide better opportunities in the future (Hirt, 2010).

We suggest that a major factor influencing mass migration from Eritrea since 2000 is the lack of opportunities for skilled labour to match individual aspirations (Horwood & Hopper, 2017; Rosberg & Tronvoll, 2017). In their analysis, Horwood and Hopper (2017: 4) conclude that "the main drivers [of migration from Eritrea] are endemic poverty, lack of livelihoods and limited political freedoms." Eritrea's national education strategy appears not to prepare youth for the labour market. However, when they are trained, there is often limited opportunity for transition as the market has relatively weak absorptive capacity, leaving many of the youth unemployed.

Human Rights and Individual Freedom

One of the most recurrent challenges highlighted in the studies we reviewed was the issue of human rights, and in this regard, reference is often made to the national service program (Amnesty International, 2015; Connell, 2012). Generally, while the national service, has the intention of infusing national consciousness and preparing youth for employment, the unintended consequence of the program appears to be that it has developed into a major impediment to the freedom of young Eritreans to choose the life they want, or at least has raised young people's perception of uncertainty (Kibreab, 2017). This is particularly the case as far as conscription is concerned. As much of the analyses suggest, many youth are compelled to participate in the service and when in the service, it is suggested that there are no guarantees as to when they will leave the program (Kibreab, 2017). This creates a disincentive for youth who may ordinarily be willing to participate in the program. Further to this, there is a general sense of Eritrea being a police state (International Crisis Group, 2014). In part, this was triggered by the 1998 border war, which ended with the famous no war no peace proclamation, and the state of alertness on the part of Eritrean authorities. There is also the challenge associated with the

suspension of the constitution, which disenfranchises and excludes most Eritreans from being a part of decision-making on issues affecting their lives (Rosberg & Tronvoll, 2017).

Many of the studies reviewed concluded that the national service program was the main cause of migration from Eritrea (Research and Evidence Facility, 2017; Rosberg and Tronvoll, 2017). As mentioned earlier, the program was instituted in 1991 with the goal of nation building and post-conflict economic development, as well as fostering and transferring Eritrea's national values to the younger generation (Kibreab, 2009). The national service was designed as one of the strategies through which the government of Eritrea was to pursue its self-reliance approach to development through the participation of youth in state-sanctioned work. However, the approach has proved to be controversial as both local and international scholars have described it as a form of forced labour and, consequently, contested its legitimacy (Kibreab, 2009). This has resulted in the depletion of the country's human capital, comparable in ways to the immediate post-war levels.

Some scholars suggest that the national service has remained an open-ended program since the renewed Eritrean-Ethiopian border conflict (Kibreab, 2017). While the youth participate in the service, there seems to be a lack of consideration for their aspirations, and most youth who participate in the program do so because they have no choice (Kibreab, 2014). According to Kibreab (2014), if a young person does not have academic, professional or vocational qualifications, they are expected to serve in the army. If the conscription is open-ended as claimed, this means those young people assigned to the military could become soldiers for the rest of their lives and against their deliberate choice. Another issue is that many youth resisted the notion of becoming teachers but, nevertheless, were assigned to teaching positions (Müller, 2004). Müller (2004: 225) summarises the effects of state policies in Eritrea on personal freedoms as follows:

Personal freedom is the main issue in these minority statements and resistance to restrictions of that freedom might become more important in the future, if the Eritrean government fails to offer to its people the opportunities they desire. The ultimate resistance for a university student to the government's plan, and with it, a rejection of showing social solidarity, is exercised in leaving the country and depriving it from the benefits the investment in a student's education should have brought.

We conclude from the literature that a restrictive environment that infringes on people's rights and freedoms to make important life choices is an important contribution to mass migration of youth from Eritrea. The extension of the national service infringes on the rights of young people to choose the lives that they value, as outlined in the capability approach (Sen, 1993). As was noted earlier, it is important for people to have the ability to choose the life they value. Where this is absent, even well intended national development policies and programs could become major barriers to people's lives and wellbeing, leading to choices that negatively affect the country.

Discussions and Policy Recommendations

When we started this article, our interest was to explore the factors that contribute to large scale Eritrean youth migration. Our analysis suggests that, rather than being attributed solely to the national service, Eritrean youth migration can also be attributed to the absence of opportunities for transition from education to employment, the tension between individual and national aspirations and limited freedoms. Therefore, we conclude that a complex mix of factors, including the national service, contribute to mass youth migration. Our conclusions are supported by the studies, reviews and reports cited throughout the paper.

With reference to tensions between Eritrea's national aspirations and those of its citizens, this is supported by many of the analyses on Eritrea, particularly those focused on education and the national service program (Kibreab, 2017; Müller, 2004; Rena, 2006). Essentially, the authors of these studies suggest that the state's attempts to control access to courses in higher education and mandate youth to undertake the national service are not aligned with the expectations of the youth for their lives (Dorman, 2005). Furthermore, Eritrea's economy has faced many challenges over the last three decades. Overall, the economy has been unable to develop the necessary absorptive capacity for new entrants into the market. While overall unemployment and youth unemployment rates are relatively low, compared to other African countries, these may be a function of the unreliable statistics emanating from the country and may be further masked by the high proportion of youth who are underemployed (African Development Bank, 2018). As pointed out above, the highly controlled state of affairs in Eritrea, reflected in many facets of national life, including the institution of the national service, is a major contributor to mass youth migration.

Drawing on the above, we deduce key policy recommendations that we believe could inform a more nuanced discourse and contribute to changes in Eritrea. Firstly, we recommend a more robust education strategy that offers young people a wide-range of options. This may require considering both their aspirations and the demands of the labour market and not necessarily the priorities of the state. Such a strategy will be effective if it accounts for not only skills that are necessary for work within Eritrea itself but also those necessary for opportunities elsewhere in the Horn of Africa. Secondly, we recommend a review of the national service program to include a fixed duration after which all participants could exit (Kibreab, 2017). In other countries, such as Nigeria, this is an option that has been built into the national youth service (Obadare, 2011) and could be a useful model for Eritrea. Thirdly, to create more economic opportunities, the Eritrean government needs to open-up the economy and create a more conducive environment for investments. This will, in turn, create more opportunities for youth, provide incentives for the youth to remain in the country, and offer development in a wider range of sectors in which youth can aspire to pursue studies, gain future employment and make their own contribution to the development of the country.

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