Download date: 14. Nov. 2026

Danish Institute for International Studies

Climate Stress Reshapes Youth Migration in Ethiopia

Sørensen, Ninna Nyberg; Hamza, Mo; Amsalu, Aklilu

Publication date:
2026

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

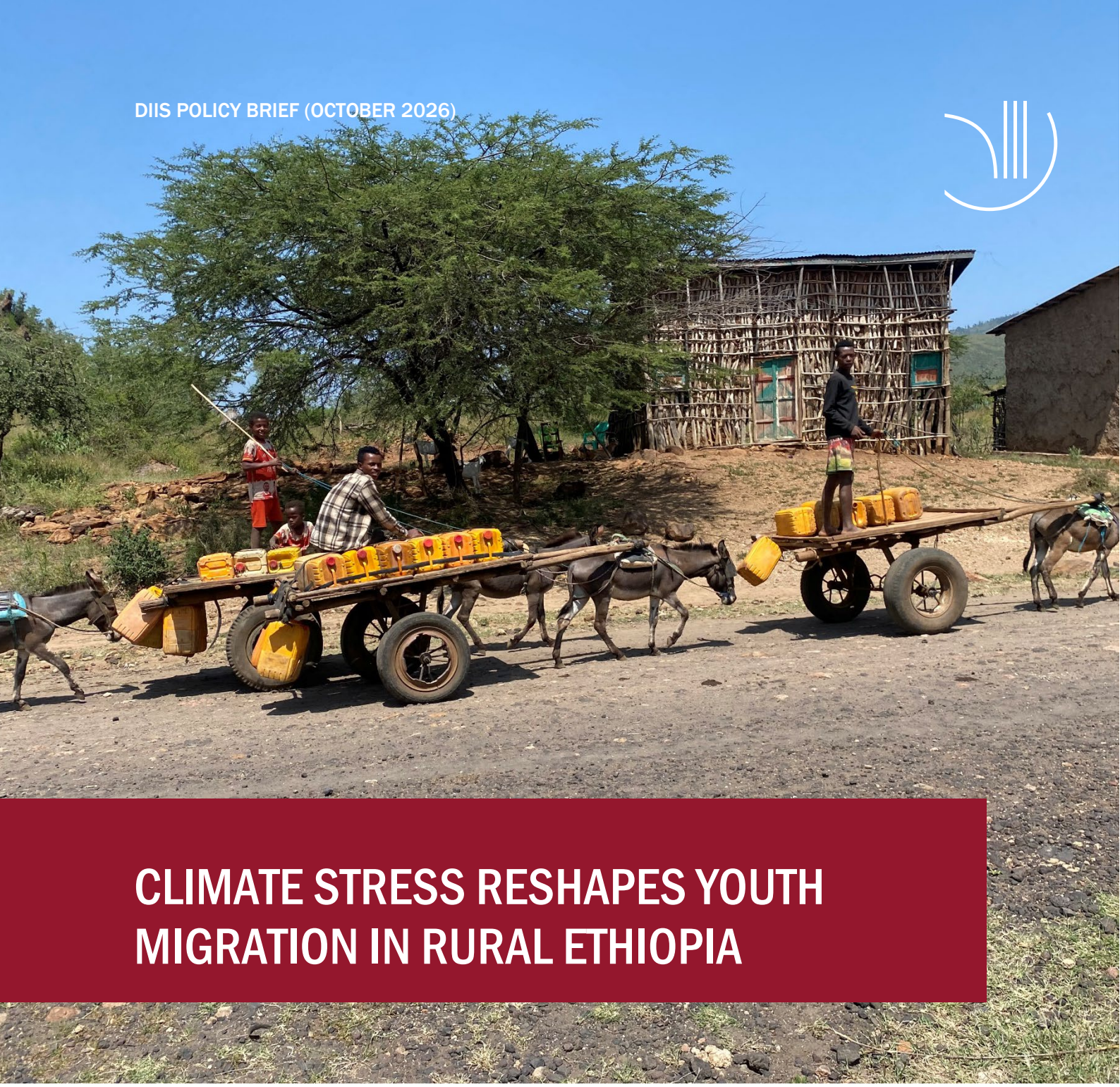
Link to publication

Citation for pulished version (APA):
Sørensen, N. N. (Ed.), Hamza, M., & Amsalu, A. (2026). *Climate Stress Reshapes Youth Migration in Ethiopia*. (pp. 1-4). Danish Institute for International Studies. DIIS Policy Brief

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



CLIMATE STRESS RESHAPES YOUTH MIGRATION IN RURAL ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia's rural economy and livelihoods depend on seasonal rainfall. When rains fail or fall out of season, crops fail, livestock die and household income collapses. For young people watching this unfold, migration may seem the immediate solution. Understanding locally specific climate vulnerabilities and young people's mobility aspirations is therefore key to developing adequate policy responses.

Evidence from southern and eastern Ethiopia shows that both climate shocks and aspiration drive youth migration.

KEY FINDINGS

- Youth migration in Ethiopia is shaped by multiple interrelated factors, including climate change.
- Vulnerability to climate shocks varies considerably across regions, shaping migration drivers in different ways.
- While youth migration is both a reactive coping mechanism and a proactive adaptation strategy, understanding diverse regional dynamics is essential for effective programming.

Climate shocks are indeed among the drivers of youth migration in rural Ethiopia. Recurrent drought, erratic rainfall, crop failures, and livestock losses exert significant pressure on livelihoods. Still, they are rarely the only forces: economic hardship, food insecurity and personal aspirations combine to shape who moves, when, and where to. At the same time vulnerability to climate shocks varies considerably and is highly uneven across regions, shaping migration drivers in different ways. The Somali region (agro-pastoral and semi-arid) has dramatically higher household vulnerability (94% highly vulnerable) than southern Ethiopia (~51–56% highly vulnerable), and its migration is more driven by acute environmental shocks. In the south, by contrast, a lack of jobs is the dominant driver.

> ‘I saw a neighbour return with new clothes and supporting his parents financially… that inspired me and made me believe I could do the same.’
>
> Youth informant, Dugna Fango

Simplistic push–pull models that treat migration as a single, undifferentiated outcome do not adequately explain mobility drivers. For many youths migration is dual-purpose, not merely a last resort. It serves both as a reactive coping mechanism (responding to droughts, crop failures, and food insecurity) and as a proactive adaptation and aspirational strategy (pursuing education, autonomy and upward mobility). At the same time, many young people who want to leave are ‘trapped’ because they lack the financial resources, networks or capabilities to migrate, despite strong aspirations. This ‘involuntary immobility’ is directly connected to the same climate pressures that drive others to move, but affects those without the means to act. Immobility is therefore as important to take into account as mobility.

Finally, mobility pathways are often varied and non-linear. Stepwise, seasonal/circular, return, and rural–urban migration each serve different functions (income smoothing vs. cumulative adaptation), and ‘return’ is often not final. It can be a transitional stage before further attempts to move, complicating tidy categorisations.

New mixed-method research conducted by the PATHWAYS collaborative research project shows that treating youth migration as a crisis to be prevented misreads what is happening on the ground. Study findings from eastern Ethiopia’s Somali region drylands (Kebribeyah) and southern Ethiopia’s highlands and midlands (Chencha and Dugna Fango) show that youth mobility is a deliberate and differentiated response to climate stress, shaped as much by ambition and opportunity as by hardship. Policies that fail to recognise this complexity risk addressing the wrong problem.

CLIMATE VULNERABILITY

Drawing on a survey of 365 households and more than 120 interviews with youth and community leaders, the study found that climate stress is nearly universal. Almost all households reported changes in rainfall patterns and two-thirds of them reported pest infestations and crop diseases linked to shifting climate conditions. These are not abstract risks; they translate directly into food shortages and income losses that prompt households to consider other options, including migration as a survival strategy.

A household vulnerability index (HVI) based on 20 indicators covering exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity reveals stark regional differences. Kebribeyah, an arid agro-pastoral area with poor infrastructure and unpredictable rainfall of just 300 to 400 mm per year, emerges as the most vulnerable area, with 94% of households in the high vulnerability category and almost none classified as low-risk. Dugna Fango and Chencha, more diversified, mixed-farming areas, fare somewhat better on average, although over half of households remain in the high vulnerability category.

Migration aspirations closely follow this pattern. Many households want their children to migrate, a desire that is markedly stronger in Kebribeyah than elsewhere. Parents cite a mixture of reasons including hope for a better life elsewhere, limited local prospects, food shortages, and direct exposure to climate-related disasters, with 96% of households identifying the aforementioned factors as the primary drivers of youth migration. Young people may point to other, both personal and family-oriented, drivers.

Figure 1: Household vulnerability index (HVI) in the different study sites

Study site	Mean HVI (0–1)	High vulnerability (% of households)	Primary livelihood
Kebribeyah	0.83	94%	Agro-pastoralism, small trade
Dugna Fango	0.61	56%	Rainfed mixed farming
Chencha	0.57	51%	Highland farming, weaving
All sites (n=365)	0.67	67%	

YOUTH MOBILITY PATHWAYS

Several distinct youth mobility pathways coexist in the study areas, each shaped by a unique combination of pressures and opportunities. First, *seasonal and circular migration* smooths household income when rainfall variability or livestock losses are most severe.

This is a temporary, income-generating response rather than a permanent departure. Stepwise *rural-to-urban migration*, in which repeated bad seasons gradually push young people to test opportunities in secondary towns before moving on, is a second, often-encountered strategy. Third, *cross-border and longer-distance migration*, more prominent in Kebribeyah, reflects both proximity to international routes and more severe local conditions. Finally, *return migration*, often triggered by unmet expectations, rising urban costs, or the loss of housing and small businesses, reminds us that migration outcomes are precarious rather than a one-way path to prosperity.

Current migration and climate adaptation policy debates largely overlook the needs of and constraints on young people unable to migrate. Involuntary immobility is a likely outcome for young people who want to move but cannot because of limited financial resources and weak social networks. Although they face many of the same climate pressures as migrants, they lack the resources and opportunities to respond by moving. Coupled with a lack of access to adequate information, these are the ones most at risk of falling prey to human smuggling and trafficking networks.

THE DOUBLE EDGE OF MOBILITY

The role of migration as a potential mechanism for climate change is increasingly propagated. Qualitative findings in the study areas suggest that successful migrants use savings, skills and experience gained elsewhere to start small businesses and support their families upon return. However, migration also poses significant challenges and risks. Interviews with young migrants highlight their exposure to informal labour exploitation and unstable, overcrowded housing conditions in urban destinations. This signals a need for strengthened and expanded safe work pathways and coordinated cross-agency responses to prevent exploitation. Whether migration strengthens or undermines young people's well-being depends not only on the decision to move but also on the conditions experienced along the migration pathway and at the destination. Hence, treating mobility solely as a failure to adapt and seeking to minimise or prevent it risks overlooking its potential to strengthen resilience as well as the vulnerabilities it creates, which require targeted protection and support.

IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Vulnerabilities and drivers vary sharply by region. Context-specific interventions are therefore needed. Interventions should be matched to local vulnerabilities and ecological, economic, and social realities (rather than uniformly programmed). Kebribeyah's agro-pastoral communities need drought-resilient water infrastructure, livestock support and safer mobility pathways. In contrast, Chencha and Dugna Fango require stronger local employment opportunities and diversified livelihoods to reduce distress-driven migration.

2. Migration is dual-purpose (coping and adaptation): Policy should recognise migration as a legitimate adaptation strategy and not treat it as a risk to manage or prevent. It should distinguish between addressing the desperation that drives forced or reactive movement and supporting safe voluntary migration by improving access to information, safe transportation and essential services at destinations.

3. Youth agency should be central, not incidental to migration policy design: Young people are already navigating structural constraints strategically, not merely reacting. Their agency and resilience should be supported by expanding access to vocational training, credit and markets, by developing entrepreneurial potential, and by providing social protection systems and climate-smart agriculture solutions. This would broaden their options, giving them both the option to stay and the means to migrate when mobility offers better opportunities.

Water stored using a membrane for domestic and livestock use during droughts in Fadayga rural village, Kebrebiyah district
Photo: Aklilu Amsalu, October 15, 2024

4. Migration exposes youth to risk: Enabling mobility without any governance or protection from exploitation, precarious urban work, and unsafe transit is incomplete. Strengthening legal protections and safeguards against exploitative labour conditions is essential, with particular attention to younger and more vulnerable migrants. The reintegration of returnees should also be supported by leveraging their skills, savings and experience to enable their contributions to local economic development.

5. Dominant narratives need to shift: Policy needs to frame migration as a legitimate response to systemic stress rather than a failure to adapt. This can be done by providing targeted support to young people who wish to migrate but lack the resources to do so, including information, small-scale financing and network support, so that immobility becomes a choice rather than a constraint or a trap.

PATHWAYS is a four-year collaborative research project that aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how children and youth in Ethiopia perceive their vulnerability and interact with the climate stressors and social protection frameworks that shape their mobility and migration patterns.

This publication has received financial support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark. It reflects the views of the author(s) alone.

Author(s): **Dr Aklilu Amsalu, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia – aklilu.amslau@aau.edu.et**
Professor Mo Hamza, Lund University, Sweden – mo.hamza@risk.lth.se

Cover photo: Dr Aklilu Amsalu

All DIIS Policy Briefs are printed on Ecolabel and FSC certified paper

Subscribe to
DIIS's newsletter

DIIS · DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
www.diis.dk