Challenges of cross-border migrants amidst the Covid-19 outbreak: The case of migrant returnees in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia

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Abstract: The unprecedented outbreak of covid-19 has affected the living conditions of irregular migrants across the globe. This article explores the challenges of cross-border migrants amid the covid-19 outbreak. It accentuates on investigating the life trajectories of irregular migrant returnees since the pandemic started. A mini survey case study was employed to collect data from selected returnees quarantined in Dire Dawa city, Ethiopia. Humanitarian workers and returnee host community members were also entailed for the data triangulation. Key informant interview and questionnaire were administered during the data collection. Partial random and convenience sampling techniques were employed to outreach the survey participants, while key informant interviewees were purposively selected. The study establishes that irregular migrants are a severely affected segment of society by the pandemic outbreak. It is unveiled that covid-19 has induced forced deportation of migrants that has risked them losing advantages they sought at the beginning of their migration. Most of the irregular migrants were excluded from stimulus packages meant to mitigate the economic crisis induced by the pandemic because they lack legal documents to claim the benefit. It is confirmed that migrants contracted covid-19 to a greater extent, forced into deportation at the time cases surged and forced to quarantine on arrival at the home country, thereby increasing their vulnerabilities. Measures taken to curb the virus has interrupted informal business activities overwhelmingly absorbing irregular migrant workers which mutated them back into impoverishment. The study demonstrates that covid-19 has ravaged the living conditions of irregular migrants and that there is need for a specific adaptive response that is considerate of migrant victims from the concerned stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

Covid-19 broke out in a world that is tightly interconnected, characterized by high population mobility for various reasons. It emerged in a globe inextricably buoyed by local and international population movements, with more people moving for work, education, family reasons, tourism, and survival than ever in the past (Skeldon, 2018). Intense population mobility, in particular of tourists and business workers, has been a key driver of the global spread of the pandemic (Hodcroft et al., 2021). Domicile and cross-border movements of people have spurred the global spread of covid-19. From its inception, in February 2020, expedited outbreaks of covid-19 occurred following the beginning of the largest annual migration in China known as the Spring Festival migration (Maogui, 2019). (Feng, 2018) as cited in (Maogui, 2019), reported that around 2.97 billion passengers travelled during the 2018 Spring Festival travel season from 1 February 2018 to 12 March 2018. Due to the geographic location of Wuhan and its role as a central transportation hub, the number of infections rose rapidly (Zhu et al., 2020). On 20 January 2020, it was publicly announced that covid-19 is human-to-human transmissible (World Health Organization /WHO/, 2020). Following the declaration of the virus as a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020 different nations suspended their flights to and from China. By February 2020, the virus had already spread to different nations outside China. Since then, nations started taking a series of unprecedented measures to contain the spread of the covid-19. Curfews were imposed, temperature surveillance commenced and widespread media awareness on how to prevent the spread of the virus launched.

After Europe became the epicenter of the virus, most international flights were grounded and nations imposed forced quarantines on overseas arrivals. Since then, migration flows were curtailed under a series of challenges in that the propensity to out-migrate declined while high number of returnees repatriated back to their home countries increased. For instance, Myanmar (Xinhua, 2020) welcomed over 120,000 returnees from Thailand during March to October 2020. The covid-19 outbreak has made migrants’ lives troublesome in that many lost their jobs; others were forced to stay in quarantine; many contracted covid-19, and faced forced deportation (ILO, 2020a; World Bank, 2020, et al.). According to (Gorevan, 2020), rigid lockdowns and movement restrictions have adversely affected migrant populations worldwide for whom loss of income, a reduction of social protection benefits, a decline in remittances and dwindling savings have led to deterioration in their already precarious living conditions (Guglielmi A et al., 2020). It is stated by (Takenaka et al., 2020) that Covid-19 has bitterly impacted migrant’s income putting remittance dependent households at risk of falling back into poverty (Ingrid et al., 2020). Covid-19 has also affected the delivery of services and assistance upon which many migrants rely for survival. Humanitarian service delivery in camps has become increasingly difficult (Bhuyan, 2020; IOM, 2020; Wesh, 2020), while many integration programmes have been interrupted (Wallis, 2020). In many countries that receive millions of migrant workers, the migrant population became the epicenter of the pandemic (Andika, 2020). Migrants often face additional barriers in accessing healthcare or information about Covid-19 in their host countries, increasing their risk of contracting the disease (Kluge et al., 2020). There was also a situation under which the pandemic was used as an opportunity to foster xenophobic and discriminatory attitudes toward the migrants (Ingrid et al., 2020). Thus, covid-19 and measures taken to contain its spread has rested multidimensional pressures on the irregular migrants, which underpins the sanity of picking this issue for the study.

A literature search shows a paucity in studies on the covid-19 migration nexus. However, interest to navigate research on covid-19 and its multidimensional ramifications on the migrant returnee is recently hiking. For instance, investigators have examined the impact of covid-19 on women and labour migrants domestically returned from urban to rural areas to escape the risks of covid-19.
infections and withstand the loss of jobs following the imposition of lockdowns in India (Abdul Azeez et al., 2020). In fact, research to date focuses on gendered aspects of the pandemic and its impact on domicile labour migrants engaging in the informal economy downplaying cross-border migrants and returnees. Owing to the unprecedented spread of covid-19, studies on the diverse impact of cross-border migrant returnees are limited. Investigating covid-19 and its challenges on irregular migrant returnee is thus, part of continuous effort to develop research-based knowledge on cross-border migrants the case of returnees hosted in Dire Dawa city, Ethiopia.

1.1. Objectives of the study
The main objective of this study was to explore the challenges of cross-border migrants amidst the covid-19 outbreak. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Assess the situations of irregular migrants prior to the move.
- Investigate the challenges of irregular migrants during the covid-19 outbreak at transit and destination countries.
- Examine situations of irregular migrants on return to home country as a result of covid-19 impacts.

1.2. Significance of the study
This study shed lights on the life trajectories of irregular migrants accentuating on their living conditions prior to the move, at destiny during covid-19 outbreak and on return to home country as a result of covid-19 impacts. The study capitalizes on efforts to boost knowledge of covid-19 impacts in the context of cross-border migration dynamics. The study could serve as a guide in the development of training programs on the risks of irregular migration amidst the pandemic. It can also serve as a starting point for large-scale further study by other researchers on the area. It also poses policy recommendations to pertinent stakeholders to help the development of irregular migrant tailored responsive mechanism to the pandemic so that their vulnerabilities would be reduced. The article also poses accommodative direction of intergovernmental cooperation in handling migrants amid the covid-19 march.

1.3. Research methods
This study targeted the returnees quarantined in Dire Dawa city after repatriation from abroad amid the covid-19 outbreak. Dire Dawa is a city located at a distance of 310 km to the south west of Djibouti, the main eastern migratory route from Ethiopia to the Middle East (Kozicki, 2015). Large figures of youths are smuggled annually from Ethiopia through Djibouti (Mesay M. & Tefere M., 2018). Dire Dawa is a transit hub for irregular migrations made to Arab countries via Djibouti. For this study, therefore, identifying Dire Dawa as the main host city of the eastern route migrant returnee was logically compelling.

A survey case study was employed to gather data from the returnees. Questionnaires and key informant interviews were administered during the data collections. It was imperative to apply both quantitative and qualitative approaches of data collection to make sense of the life trajectories of migrants since the covid-19 outbreak (Figure 1). Extra precautions were taken to prevent the transmission of covid-19 from returnees to data enumerators by contacting only those who had completed their forced quarantine and tested negative for the covid-19.

Since the covid-19 outbreak, the influx of returnees was significantly high in Dire Dawa city. Returnees were admitted into forced quarantine on a daily basis before they were exonerated following government ease of restrictions and advising quarantine in private homes. According to the data obtained from Save the Children, the total number of returnees quarantined in Dire Dawa city were 1916. This is a figure captured during the early phase of the covid-19 outbreak and used solely for this study purposes. Sample sizes picked from the total returnees compiled in the early phase of the pandemic was 43. Slovin formula was used to calculate the samples as follows:
\[ n = N \\
1 + Ne^2 \]

where: \( n \) = Required sample
\( N \) = Total returnee
\( e^2 \) = Margin of error

\[ n = \frac{1916}{1} + 1916(0.15)^2 = 43 \]

It is imperative to pin the point here that returnees compiled for the report consumption in the early phase of covid-19 march were considered in this study. Those returnees hosted at public quarantine centers were targeted. A total of 43 returnee respondents participated in the survey. These respondents were selected based on the criteria that they returned amidst the covid-19, finished quarantine and tested negative for the covid-19. Partial random and convenience sampling techniques were employed in the process of identifying the respondents. Circa 60% of the respondents were females while the male account for 40%. Dire Dawa University and Dire Dawa high school were the two public quarantine centers considered in this study. Age wise, all respondents range from 18 to 55.

On the other hand, eight returnees were picked for the key informant interview. Interviewees compose one person from the host communities, three individuals from the humanitarian workers and four persons from the returnees. Detailed information was generated from the informants to the point of data saturation. Out of eight interviewees, five were
females while three were males. Mixed methods were used in the course of data analysis. Data were thematized and analyzed such that the quantitative data complements qualitative data. Secondary analysis was also employed to augment the narration of amalgamated data. Ethical issues were addressed at each phase of the study to keep the information confidential and anonymous. Written informed consent was obtained from the willing respondents.

2. Results and discussion

2.1. Drivers and challenges of irregular migrants

Covid-19 emerged in a world tightly interconnected and characterised by high population mobility from place to place for various reasons. Data shows an influx of returnees since the pandemic outbreak, escaping the crisis induced by the covid-19. For instance, 1916 people returned to Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, in the first wave of covid-19 rage through Djibouti route from overseas.

Out of the returnees considered in this study, the majority belong to Oromia regional state. Consistent with this, International Labour Organization /ILO/ (2013) survey in collaboration with the Ministry of Social and Labour Affairs/MoLSA/ found that 50 percent of migrants and 57 percent of returnees in Yemen were Oromos (Frouws, 2014). Returnees from Tigray region were the second largest, followed by those from Amhara region. People from Harari region were meagre among the returnees. Data available shows an accelerated influx of labour migrants across the world. For instance, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Huaxia, 2020a) welcomed about 100,000 repatriated nationals as of June 2020.

Among the returnees quarantined in Dire Dawa city, 341 people were children, of which some were unaccompanied and some others were separated from their parents or guardians (Save the Children, 2020). This study considered children as those whose age is below 18 according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990). It was common to accept children returning amidst the covid-19 outbreaks because they also encountered a broad spectrum of challenges. A study confirms that Unaccompanied and Separated Migrant Children (USMC) experience extreme vulnerability to coercion, violence, and exploitation in destination countries (Flamm, 2018). This vulnerability was further compounded during the pandemic. One informant returned from Saudi Arabia stated this:

I was working as housemaid in Jida, Saudi Arabia. I used to send money every month to support my children and husband at home country. Up on police surveillance during the covid-19 outbreak, I was apprehended and taken to prison for not having a legal document. I was deported from prison before getting back to my employer’s house in Jida even for the collection of my wages and stuffs. I was returned back to Ethiopia barren hand. My husband is baby sitter from the start and I couldn’t also secure income generating means on return to support my children’s health and nutritional expenses.

Data illustrate that households lost their jobs due to covid-19 outbreak and they were forced to disrupt their children's nutrition, health, and social protection. Covid-19 exacerbated the already existing challenges like human right violations, gender-based violence and xenophobic discrimination across class and racial dimensions (Harvey, 2020). More than half of returnees in this study were women working as housemaids in the Middle East but repatriated during the pandemic outbreak and consequently lost their jobs. Evidence confirms that the pandemic significantly increased women’s vulnerability to abuse and violence. Covid-19 therefore is, characterized as a gendered pandemic in the uneven impact it exerted on women and girls in the domains of health, the economy and social protection (UN, 2020).
Majority of the returnees responded that they initially migrated to look for jobs in the destination country. Unemployment is the main driver of irregular migration of people to overseas. People assume that they would get better job opportunities in the destination country. They make a deal with smugglers to get there by producing fraudulent documents or any other possible means. People are compelled to migrate because of prolonged joblessness that induces desitution and the trap in famine. Unemployment, coupled with poverty, is the decisive factor accounting for the influx of people from Ethiopia to the Middle East and Gulf States. A survey shows that 19.4% of the respondents moved to meet their separated families and loved ones. People are determined to move when their chances of meeting a loved one is blocked through the formal visa process. Another situation provoking the desperate movement of people is the dire political dynamics in the country of origin. Ethiopia has a single vanguard party that monopolizes the political space by purging the oppositions. Members and leaders of the opposition parties are susceptible to atrocities in locked-up jails unless they flee out of the country beforehand. Opposition parties are forced into exile to escape the brutality of the ruling party. For instance, EIU (2015) states that the contribution of some armed organizations such as the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Ginbot 7, designated as terrorist organizations by the government and banned since 2011 have some ominous part to play in migration in one way or the other. Hence, politics is another factor compelling migrants out of their country. In line with the aforementioned discussion, a case study conducted in South Africa states that people leave their country of origin for economic reasons, to escape war and conflict, political oppression, ethnic persecution, to be reunited with relatives, and for educational purposes (Ingrid Palmary, 2018). Informants reported that they were migrated irregularly through different routes. People resort to insecure migration when a legal avenue is curtailed. Irregular migrants violate the government’s border protection by facilitating smugglers modus operandi. People with no legal documents during the move have no legal protection from sending, transiting, and destination countries and hence endure human rights violations, abuse, and discrimination. Data illustrate that irregular migrants are often vulnerable to trafficking, kidnapping, jail, death, abuses, and other atrocities. One informant reported the following:

My friend motivated me to go with him paying 30000 ETB commission for the broker sending us to another broker in Dire dawa and then Djibouti. After his prolonged lobbying, I agreed to move. One day, we woke up early morning and took bus heading to Dire Dawa from Deder. Up on arrival to Dire Dawa city, we were taken to a dark room by the person broker assigned to host us. Next day morning, we took a bus heading to Dawalle, a city closer to Djibouti border from Dire Dawa. We overnighted their till midnight and started our journey to Djibouti on foot. We were highly starved and exhausted on the way. Then, we were kidnapped by the Djibouti police on the border and taken to prison after harsh treatment.

A number of questions arise in this study: Why do Ethiopians resort to irregular migration? Is it because the regular avenues to migrate and the option to work and grow domestically are blocked? Does the government pay due attention to irregular migration in the development agenda of the country? The Ethiopian government seems dependent on civil society organizations in providing assistance to migrants and returnees. Facts on the ground show the low response of the Ethiopian government to risky migration because of government interest to see a politically active generation challenging its power purged. In turning a blind eye to irregular migration, the government silently purges its own citizens and in the process consolidates political power without a challenge. For instance, in 2016, Freedom House gave Ethiopia the lowest score on political rights attributed to the government’s attempt of constricting political space during the 2015 parliamentary elections, and received a rating of 6 out of 7 on civil liberties (7 being the worst) (Freedom House 2015). Department for International Development (DFID) (2014) also indicates that Ethiopia has a long way to go toward establishing a functioning democracy with effective rule of law. Risky migration is not Ethiopian government priority as it is busy maintaining political status quo through suppression of the wider people’s demand for change. Addressing risky migration needs mainstreaming migration in the development agenda of the country. Risky migration could be
addressed by installing an accommodative political system and conglomerate economies that could host political opponents and jobless youths leaving the country, respectively. Ethiopian government remains stubbornly reluctant to work on reforming the country’s political economy to address risky migration. It is insensitive to migrants dying or missing in the jungle and Mediterranean Sea every year. Therefore, it is not optional for youths to migrate amidst the plight of traffickers’ threat, Sahara Desert, and Mediterranean Sea’s waves to escape the political persecution and economic ruin at home. This implies that formulating a comprehensive migration policy that recalibrates the socio-political and economic dynamics of the country in to account is significant in addressing the risky migration.

As the data tells, the majority of the respondents were returned from Djibouti, a transit hub for Ethiopian migrants to Gulf countries. Djibouti is a country where migrants stay until they secure a way out to the next destination. The vast majority migrants from Ethiopia stay in Djibouti to enter into deals with smugglers before transiting to the next country of move. Circa 19% of the respondents were returned from Yemen, a country assailed by the double chaos of covid-19 and war among political factions. It is troubling to see people flee to Yemen while the same country plunges into complicated political and public health crises. Constrained Yemenis themselves are dying of hunger and protracted civil war while others seek refuge in neighbouring countries. One study shows that regardless of the dire situation in Yemen, the number of Ethiopians arriving in Yemen is greater than that of any other country in the Horn of Africa (RMMS, 2018). Although, Yemen is in the most distracting for human life and work, RMMS (2018) shows that from January to May, 55,000 people have left for Yemen from the Horn of Africa, where most were Ethiopians. Thus, returning from Djibouti and Yemeni is associated with the difficulty of finding passes to the next destination because of restraining factors like war and covid-19. Around 16 percent of respondents reported that they were repatriated from Saudi Arabia. One returnee from Saudi Arabia reported “What is anticipated is quite different from what is faced on arrival”. Data demonstrate that migrant returnees survive labour exploitation and human rights violation in Saudi Arabia.

2.2. Challenges of irregular migrants amidst the Covid-19 outbreak

Unprecedented outbreak of covid-19 has disrupted the living conditions of irregular migrants in different dimensions. The pandemic and subsequent measures to control its spread have posed profound social, economic, and structural challenges to migrant workers across many countries (Foley, and Piper, 2020). Covid-19 has uprooted myriads from their jobs, disrupted informal economies mainly absorbing unskilled migrants, induced forced deportation and increased vulnerabilities of irregular migrants. One returnee reported the following:

I was jobless, but used to earn some irregular income from washing a car on the road side in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. I was deported from Saudi Arabia following the country’s massive deportation of labour migrants immediately after covid-19 outbreak. Prior to deportation, I was detained for violating a curfew while washing a car on the street. Natives engaging in resembling business were not prisoned rather instructed to stop as they would be provided a relief support. I was infected by the pandemic on the way back home to Ethiopia. Thanks to Allah, I have now recovered after some traditional treatments. Currently, I am jobless and dependent on my uncle for survival. I am deeply concerned about sitting idle and falling back in to poverty.

One of the prominent challenges that the returnees reported amidst the covid-19 outbreak was forced deportation. A large proportion of returnees reported that their deportation was forced due to the covid-19 outbreak. In fact, there were also some migrants who returned home voluntarily to escape the infections of Covid-19, especially from hard-hit countries during the first wave of infection. For instance, Cambodia (IOM, 2020a) welcomed over 100,000 repatriated returnees since March 2020. However, the majority of the returnees were forced to return after having experienced detention and other hardships. This begs the question how a country undergoing a nationwide lockdown allows for the deportation of migrants while everybody is expected to hibernate for the containment of the pandemic. The implied and ominous point is that these
migrants could have contracted covid-19 in the repatriation process. It is hypocritical to force migrants to travel out while a curfew is in place, banning all means of non-essential travel. This implies that the way some governments approached covid-19 was against the rights of the migrants from the get-go. Migrants were stigmatized, ridiculed and deported under the pretext of containing the pandemic. There was a predicament for migrants who fled back home to escape stigma attributed to the covid-19. Diaspora communities, particularly unsettled migrants, used to be the spotlight victims of covid-19 in this regard.

Deportation of migrants generates severe consequences for the migrants, their families, and local communities. Studies on the economic consequences of deportation indicate that deported workers are less likely to benefit from migrating, since they rarely acquire an opportunity to earn income, save money, and gain skills and education (Mulgeta, M., & Makonnen, T. 2018). Deported returnees become a burden for their families and host communities until they re-establish their livelihoods. One study shows that in countries such as Ethiopia and Nepal (AGRUMIG, 2020), migrant households often take up loans to cover upfront costs of international migration, while in Kyrgyzstan (Ryskulova, 2020) households taking out loans expect their migrant family members abroad to repay them. The sudden outbreak of covid-19 and precipitous return to home country plunged the migrant and their families in debt of loans received initially to facilitate the migration. Returnees were repatriated bare-handed remained a burden to the host families, deepening their vulnerability to economic crisis. Such situation initiated re-migration, adding other family members to get rid of debt and the families getting mired in liabilities even after the pandemic is under control. Deportation of migrant would also risk the country loss of hard currency derived from the diaspora communities that severely affect the economy of the parties involved. Available data suggest that some countries tend to view migrant workers as a separate community living temporarily, and hence serving no strategic interest to the country which underpins their forced deportation.

It is demonstrated that irregular migrants are underemployed and in insecure employment status which covid-19 has further complicated. Migrants often engage in daily labour and other blue-collar jobs in the country of destination to generate irregular income for survival. The majority migrants suffer deteriorated working and living conditions as they take up in low-wage jobs. Often, migrants engage in informal business, in unsafe working environments and are denied basic labour rights such as access to health insurance. In Malaysia, for instance, migrant labourers are generally confined to unskilled and low wage earning jobs (Pappusamy, 2014). Culture shock, language barriers, and discrimination are also some of the challenges faced by migrants in work places (Anna Pat et al., 2020). Migrants engage in a labour intensive industry under a congested environment where it is hardly possible to exercise physical distancing. They are potentially in a more vulnerable position in the labour market due to their generally less stable employment conditions and lower seniority on the job. The impact of covid-19 on the migrants is therefore, higher than the native, which is manifested by their over-representation in those countries mostly affected by the pandemic. For example, in the particularly hard-hit hospitality industry, a quarter of employees in the EU are foreign-born, twice their share in overall employment (OECD, 2020). On the other hand, a study reports that migrants are conscripted to long hours of work in labour-intensive manufacturing to produce personal protective equipment like facemasks and gloves amidst the pandemic outbreak (Andika, 2020). Migrant workers are exploited in the manufacturing sector to produce personal protective equipment for prolonged hours under congested and unhygienic circumstances, risking themselves to health crisis. Despite some countries receiving praise for flattening the curve, the way they handled migrants during the pandemic outbreak is therefore, not far from the critics.

According to the ILO estimations as of September 2020 (ILO, 2020a), economies and livelihoods around the world have been tremendously affected by the pandemic. Covid-19 has had far-reaching economic crisis consequences on irregular migrants in the informal economic activities. Restriction of movement to adhere to physical distancing, mass tests, and temperature...
surveillance were implemented to control the pandemic. Data in this study show that some actions to curb the pandemic such as movement restrictions, lock down, and deportation have worsened the living conditions of undocumented migrants. Migrants were deprived of basic survival needs due to covid-19 and the informal economy that generally absorbs migrant workers almost collapsed in its entirety. The covid-19 crisis is expected to have a long-term impact on informal sector workers (International Labour Organization, 2020). Pachauri (2020) also argues that covid-19 could result in a long-term shock for poor people in the informal sector. Ranjan et al., (2020) reiterates that informal sector is the first to be hard-hit by the strict lockdown and quarantine measures to control the virus. What rattles the irregular migrant here is that they are highly insecure and unregulated, with few or no social security provisions.

Migrant unemployment, on the other hand, affects not only migrants themselves but also dependent families in the home country who rely on remittances of migrant workers. In India, for instance, a survey carried out during June-August 2020, established that the income of migrant workers had dropped by 85 percent on average after their return (Mohanty, 2020). Migrants generating their wages from daily labour were forced by restrictions following the imposition of curfew to contain the pandemic. Lockdown imposed in response to Covid-19 evicted migrants from their jobs and cut their incomes that shattered their economic backbone. There is evidence that those moved amidst the pandemic were subject to prison for violating a curfew while others contracted covid-19. People were purported to be at home amidst the waves of covid-19 rage. However, for people patronage is denied, how it is possible to survive without outdoor efforts? Data reveal that immigrants moved to win bread for themselves and their families were persecuted for violating a curfew. One can blatantly notice a significant humanitarian crisis induced by the covid-19, particularly on undocumented migrants relying on hand-to-mouth jobs. It is reported that migrants faced the risk of contracting covid-19 on return and while scrambling to manage an economic crises induced by the pandemic. Research shows a significant overrepresentation of immigrants in the incidents of covid-19. For instance, among the confirmed cases in Norway, 31% are foreign-born (mainly from countries with a high share of humanitarian emigrants), almost twice as much as their share among the population (OECD, 2020a). The trend during the peak of the pandemic (13 March to 7 May 2020) was the same in Sweden, with 32% of cases being immigrants (with 19% of the population) as well as in Denmark, where immigrants from lower-income countries and their native-born children account for 18% of the infected, twice as many as their share in the Danish population (OECD, 2020a). Ethiopia is not exceptional in this regard, as covid-19 has infected and claimed the life of many migrant returnees. As of 30 October 2021 official report reveals that 8182 people have contracted covid-19 while, 150 of them have died in only Dire Dawa city (Dire Dawa covid-19 taskforce report, October 2021). Out of 8182 infected people in Dire Dawa city, 15 percent of them had cross-boarder travel history (Dire Dawa covid-19 taskforce report, October 2021). According to the ministry of health official update report, 376,375 people have contracted covid-19 in Ethiopia while, 6866 of them have died as of 19 December 2021.

Data derived in this study show that the migrant groups had a higher possibility of losing a job and appeared to be less furloughed during the pandemic outbreak. A longitudinal study conducted in UK unveiled a higher job loss of “Bame” immigrants during the lockdown, while this was not observed for immigrants who self-declared to be of “white” origin (Hu, 2020). The loss of livelihood options consecutively creates a fear among irregular migrants of falling back into poverty (World Bank, 2020). Data show that unprecedented outbreak of covid-19 and ensued loss of jobs panicked migrant workers about sliding back to impoverishment. Covid-19 has ravaged the market too by choking production, and transportation of goods and services which made humanitarian service delivery in the camps very difficult (Bhuiyan, 2020; Al Munajed, D., & Ekren, E. 2020; Welsh, 2020), while many integration programmes have been interrupted (Wallis, 2020). This implies that if covid-19 prolongs, many could be trapped in long-term economic degeneration. That is perhaps why some countries launched a relief packages to manage the economic crises induced by the covid-19. However, informants reported that they were not considered in the relief supports as
they lacked legal documents to claim the benefits. This makes Covid-19 implicated in the precarity of undocumented migrants who are less positioned to cope with losses in earnings during a recession and who have no alternative social security available.

**2.3. Situations of irregular migrant returnees after repatriation**

Data implicate that the influx of migrant returnees increased amidst the covid-19 outbreak in fear of infection and loss of jobs following mobility restriction, because of forced deportation and to find a survival means. Irregular migrants engaging in the informal sector are the dominant in terms of repatriation to withstand the covid-19 perilous and consecutive loss of livelihoods. For instance, Venezuelans, who had fled the country’s political crisis to work in the informal economy in Colombia were forced to return home, often on foot, leaving them at risk of human trafficking and attacks by armed groups (Response for Venezuelans, 2020). In Nicaragua, over 58,000 nationals were returned due to loss of jobs abroad during March–August 2020 (Velásquez, 2020). Consistent with cross-border migration, data show, large figures of labour migrants returning from urban to rural areas domestically to escape the rage of covid-19. In India (PTI, 2020), according to official data, over 10 million internal migrant workers were forced to leave urban areas and return back home on foot during the March to June 2020 period.

As returnees reported, forced quarantine was among the challenges they faced on return to Ethiopia. Ethiopian government launched fortnight forced quarantine for overseas arrival as one of the covid-19 prevention protocols. Some weeks later, government added that “accommodation expenses during the forced quarantine would be covered by the returnees themselves”. It is substantial to question that most returnees are not economically capable to cover accommodation expenses at the quarantine centers, as most of them have been jobless and underemployed before deportation. It was troublesome therefore, to restrict returnees in quarantine at the expenses of their pockets. Although the government thought that forced quarantine would reduce covid-19 spread in this regard, there was a scenario under which it reversely fueled. Some returnees concealed their profile and hibernated in the community before being admitted to the quarantine to escape unwanted accommodation expenses. That has increased the probability of contact between the returnees that were not quarantined and host community members, which speeded up the spread of the virus. One key informant reported the following:

I was returned from Djibouti. On arrival, I was hosted at Dire Dawwa university quarantine center. I was in charge of covering my accommodation costs in the quarantine center. One friend adjacent to my bed escaped from the quarantine center after two days' admission because, he hadn’t money to pay for his food. Other friends arrived after me were directly sent home for self-isolation. I was out from quarantine center two weeks later and sent to my family.

The other informant stated:

In the village, people are gossiping about me, saying look at that virus carrier person. They are also running away when they see me. As a result, I prefer to stay home than going out and participate in the public affairs. I could not even able to do some business to support my family. I am sitting idle since returned.

Social stigma is another problem reported to be the challenges of the returnees. Returnees were excoriated by the mainstream society because of the fact that they could manifest a typical behavior that is not common in the locality. Local communities are not versatile to oddly exhibitions and hence returnees are vulnerable to ostracism for the behavior they adopted during the move. Lack of education and extra cling to cultural norms and values make the local communities intolerable of returnees’ strange diacritics. Returnees living abroad for many years may find themselves with limited social networks and lacking up-to-date patterns on how things are done locally. The shame of returning empty hand is also unbearable for most of the returnees and some of them choose to isolate themselves (Kleist & Bob-Milliar, 2013). Recent research shows that the
pandemic has exacerbated existing disparities, further deteriorating the conditions of poor and migrant returnees (Che, Du, and Chan, 2020; Baas, 2020). Covid-19 outbreak shored up the segregation of returnees because of community suspects that returnees could be contracted to the virus. In some cases, returnees face stigmatization and discrimination, as they are perceived as potential carriers of the virus, and as increasing the risk of exposure to Covid-19 (FAO, 2020a). For instance, stigmatization resulted in local communities isolating and, in some cases, even preventing Afghans (IOM, 2020d) returning home from the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Zimbabwe, (The Zimbabwe Mail, 2020) returnees are reported to be hidden from authorities and neighbours. Data reveal that Ethiopia is not exceptional in this regard as returnees were escaped at a distance and rumoured as the carrier of the virus because of the mere fact that they are the returnees. Returnees repatriated amidst the pandemic were thus, the double victims of social stigma. That is the challenge psycho-social practitioners reported during the reintegration and reunification of returnees to the local community amidst the covid-19 outbreak (Interview with Save the Children International staff, 2020).

Data unveil that joblessness is another pressing issue threatening the survival of returnees on return amidst the pandemic. In Ethiopia, no matter how there was an effort; the response to covid-19 economic crisis looks apathetic. This is corroborated by the government decisions to restrict quarantine at the private homes and denying any stimulus funds for the needy returnees. Returnees were neither in a position to afford living expenses nor they got patronage from the government. This implies that migrant returnees were not lucky in getting sympathy from either deporting or hosting governments. In Bangladesh (Zahid, 2020) for instance, migrants returning to rural areas were not on official lists of beneficiaries and were thus, unable to access government support under safety net programmes despite the government pledged to provide a relief support. Can returnees from abroad therefore, withstand the perilous of economic depletion? Can the family depending on remittance and scarce resources withstand the economic shock induced by the covid-19 pandemic? An assessment in Viet Nam (IOM, 2020a) disclosed that 60 percent of returnees interviewed were unemployed. Finding a new job was the biggest challenge for Cambodian (IOM, 2020a) return migrants too where, 38 percent of respondents, surveyed in June 2020, indicated they were unemployed and 24 percent relied on daily wages. This would induce glaring impacts of returnee’s remigration once the pandemic is under control.

Surprisingly, the majority of the respondents reported that they have a plan to re-migrate once the pandemic has got under control. This divulges the desperate living conditions of returnees back at home country. Research indicates the presence of various factors enticing returnees for the remigration. Personal preferences, inability to befit with unattractive local living conditions and social conflicts are some of the factors provoking remigration (Food and agricultural organization of the united nation, FAO, 2021). Unemployment and dire economic situation at home country is another decisive factor propelling returnees to re-migrate. As revealed in the above table, small percentage of returnees sought to work at home country while the majority do not see any other option than remigration because of structural challenges that made them migrate in the first place, combined with the impacts of covid-19, further exacerbating their vulnerability. A survey in Lao People’s Democratic Republic (IOM, 2020b), carried out during June–September 2020, for example, found that 36 percent of migrant workers had the intention to leave for a labour destination abroad after the end of the pandemic, while 33 percent planned to stay within the country and 25 percent were still not sure. In Cambodia (IOM, 2020a), 71 percent of returnees from Thailand surveyed between March and June 2020 expressed their desire to re-migrate to Thailand, while 25 percent wanted to stay. Out of contacted respondents in this study, it is circa 16% only who planned to resort to working at home country as a means of post corona virus survival. Some youths have reported that they have a plan to resume their education while some others even do not know what to do after the covid-19 has gone.

Returnees demonstrated that they are desperate about their safety from covid-19 because of the reason that the community within which they are reintegrated is ignorant of protection
measurements. Returnees are panicked that the community's grudging response to covid-19 spread could risk them the possibility of contracting the pandemic. One member of the host community said:

There is no corona in Ethiopia. Corona is the farange's disease; what does it do in Africa? Life is as usual to us. We chew together; we shake each other's hand in greeting; we work together; we eat together; we do not wear a facemask and we live together. Even authorities do not say anything when they gather us to discuss on some political agenda.

It is evident in the above data that local communities do not adhere to covid-19 protection protocols issued by the World Health Organization and National Ministry of Health. People chew khat in a group and do not practise physical distancing. Their perception toward the pandemic is also prejudiced in that they attach it to the white race. This implies that people are not aware of the pandemic nature to take precautionary measures, perhaps due to lack of education and cultural settings in which they live that encourage communal ways of life. That is perhaps why returnees feel that they cannot be safe from the pandemic living in the community where covid-19 is underestimated. It is revealed in the data that Ethiopian government didn't take serious measurements to contain the pandemic and as a result people do not confide that they would be safe from the pandemic. Ethiopia registered its first corona virus cases on 13 March 2020 a couple of days after the World Health Organization declared it as a pandemic. First cases were imported by the two Japanese nationals, who were in Ethiopia for educational investment purposes. Following the discovery of positive cases in Ethiopia, schools closed, curfew imposed, and patterned societal interactions interrupted. Regional governments took the initiative to restrain movements across the towns. By then, organizations were limited to working from home; however, the restrictions were lifted two weeks later and replaced by the state of emergency that did not restrain people's movement from one place to another. Detailed content on how the state of emergency fight against covid-19 was obscure. Critics from the opposition voiced that “the government declared a state of emergency to leverage it for political manipulation”.

State of emergency (command post) was declared at the critical time the country faced a looming constitutional crisis following the postponement of the 2020 national election. There was criticism that “the government used Covid-19 as a pretext to postpone the national election without all-inclusive discussion and accord with political opponents, while by itself summoning a large number of people to cajole about its own political agenda, violating covid-19 protection protocols.” Leveraging covid-19 for political manipulation remains a key point in the blame-game that has fuelled the tension between Prosperity Party (PP) and Tigrai People Liberation Front (TPLF) added up to the fundamental ideological and political differences. As one informant reported, “Prosperity Party insisted on postponement of the national election alleging to settle the looming constitutional crisis with the interpretation of selected clauses in the constitution through the ‘rubberstamp’ expertise of the law withdrawn by the Prosperity Party itself. TPLF on its side took a stubborn stance that the national election should be held as per the schedule stipulated in the FDRE constitution regardless of how long Covid-19 stays”. It was with this deadlock polarization that Tigrai regional government headed to the regional election while the federal government insisted with the postponement of the national election. In this respect, covid-19 is politicized to a certain extent by the main actors that finally blows up the inevitable military confrontation between the TPLF and PP. The postponement of the national elections has neither contained the pandemic nor salvaged the country from plunging into the military standoff. It is implicated that covid-19 would never go away the sooner people expect and it could keep marching in different waves of infection unless the government takes restrictive and adaptive measurements. Currently, Ethiopian government is busy with internal war and bombshell agenda of geopolitical deadlock with Egypt and Sudan on the Grand Renaissance dam of the Nile River. Covid-19 is competing with the above sensitive political agenda to get into the government attention. There is hysteria that the government may not pay due attention to the containment of the covid-19 in giving priority to
the salvage of its own political interests which affects returnees confide in the government for keeping them safe from the pandemic.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

Insecure migration is the movement of people irregularly risking themselves to a range of challenges from the place of origin, transit to a place of destination. A multifaceted range of drivers, mainly unemployment, poverty, political persecution, and the need to meet loved ones underpin the desperate movement of people out of their country. People are compelled to move when the hope of changing their living conditions in the home country is diminished. Irregular migrants have no legal documents and hence have no legal protection from the country of sending, transiting, and arriving. They endure human right violations, discriminations, detention, and other atrocities during the move.

The outbreak of covid-19 has immensely scaled up the challenges migrants could face in the country of transit and arrival. It induced forced deportation of migrants for which the majority of Ethiopian returnees were repatriated from Djibouti and Yemen. Large proportions of returnees were deported after having experienced detention and hardship amidst the rage of the pandemic. This implies that the way some nations approached covid-19 from the onset was paranoid to undocumented migrants. It is also established in this study that migrants contracted covid-19 while scrambling to manage the economic crises induced by the pandemic. Over-representation of migrants in the incidence of covid-19 is evident as migrants engage in daily work under congested environments where it is hardly possible to exercise physical distancing, thereby increasing their vulnerability to the pandemic. They are conscripted to long hours of work in labour-intensive manufacturing to produce personal protective equipment amidst the pandemic outbreak. It was also concomitantly unveiled that migrants are evicted from their daily labour to comply with the imposition of curfew during the covid-19 outbreak. It was divulged that irregular migrants had neither robust source of funds nor embraced in the economy stimulus packages as they lack legal documents to claim the benefit. Covid-19 has ravaged the market by choking production and transportation of goods and services from one place to another, which triggered the difficulties of migrants’ lives even after the loss of jobs. Hence, covid-19 has induced humanitarian crisis particularly on undocumented migrants relying on hand-to-mouth jobs.

Social stigma is reported to be the challenge of returnees on repatriation. Most of the returnees are also a burden to their families as they remained jobless after being repatriated. The majority of the returnees’ had the plan to re-migrate once the pandemic has got under control. This divulges the desperate living conditions and dire economic situations in the country that propel returnees to re-migrate. Although some returnees get back to the country in escape of covid-19, they do not confide in the host community and government that they would make them safe from contracting the virus. Data reveal that covid-19 is more of leveraged for the political interests of the Ethiopian government than protecting the safety of its citizens particularly migrant returnees.

Finally, the study recommends that the government should refrain from using covid-19 to leverage for political purposes. Covid-19 should gain due attention from the government and the wider public. Government structures at the woreda and village levels should get enough information on the pandemic and inform people to adapt to safety and restriction measures. Government must supply sufficient PPE to the citizens and make aware all to act cautiously. It is also recommended to sensitize frontline humanitarian workers operating amidst covid-19 through incentives and supply of PPE. Group works like “dabo” and working in overcrowded offices and market should be reduced to manage the uncontrollable expansion of the contagion.

Irregular migrant’s considerate response to covid-19 should be in place to reduce vulnerabilities and further economic tragedies. Countries should adapt the direction of intergovernmental cooperation and the ease of restrictions for labour migrants with safety measures in place to allow the needy migrants withstand the economic losses. Strategies to re-establish their economy should be
in place to avoid their remigration. Government should reform the political economy of the country to reduce people migrating because of political and economic crisis. Political spaces should be widened and employment opportunities should be created for the jobless returnees and would be migrants. Regular avenues of migration should also be promoted. Returnees should gain due respect and attention from the host government and communities. Psycho-social support structures should be provided for the returnees to rehabilitate them from the pain of covid-19 and migration hardships. Communities prejudiced attitude toward the pandemic and consecutive returnees amidst the pandemic should be reformed through media awareness and extension education.

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