

# Youth livelihood strategies in the Bale Eco-Region, Ethiopia

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Two boys filling containers with forest honey in the Bale Eco-Region.

## Summary

Eco-Regions can positively influence environmental, economic, and social systems if they are properly used and managed. This research attempted to explore how livelihood strategies of the youth are related to conservation of the Bale Eco-Region. The fieldwork included primary data collection using qualitative and quantitative techniques and collection of secondary data mostly from reports and policy documents. The total youth population is 346,682 comprising about a fifth of the total population of the Bale Eco-Region. The youth rely on, or look for, economic opportunities in agriculture, given the rural context of the region. Roughly 26% of the youth in this ecoregion are either seasonal or permanent migrants. Some local initiatives exist to positively engage the youth in soil conservation, participatory forest management, and starting micro and small enterprises. However, these initiatives were not considered as fully successful. The existing national population policy and its practical implementation need to be reviewed. There is inadequate effort to control rapid population growth and migration, adding pressure to already fragile natural resources in the Bale Eco-Region.

## Background

An ecoregion (ecological region) is an ecologically and geographically defined area. Ecoregions can positively influence environmental, economic, and social systems if they are properly used and managed. Ecosystem services serve several environmental benefits such as watershed protection, biodiversity conservation, ecosystem service, habitat for wildlife, nutrient retention, climate stabilization, flood control and groundwater recharge (OFWE 2015). From the social aspect, ecoregions have cultural and spiritual values in that they can be used as recreational centers for the local community and tourists. Moreover, plant diversity in the ecoregion can be used as sources for different medicines and for educational and research purposes as well. They can also be livelihood niches if they are properly managed. However, oftentimes, ecoregions are negatively altered by different factors. This research attempted to explore how the youth (15-29) livelihood strategies are related to the Bale Eco-Region (BER). The findings show that, overall, the youth livelihood strategies (including migration as a strategy) in the BER negatively affect the environment.



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## Methodology

The study was carried out in the following three districts in the BER: Dinsho (highland), Goba (highland and midland) and Dello Mena (lowland). Based on their agroecological characteristics, migration experiences, forest coverage and accessibility, seven sample Kebeles representing all agroecological zones were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Researchers used primary and secondary data. Secondary data consisted mostly of government and NGO reports and policy documents. The primary data collection was based on a combination of qualitative (interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation) and quantitative methods (survey) and included the local population, migrants and representatives from government institutions, NGOs and the local research institutions in the BER. The total sample of youth surveyed in the study was 364 of which 47% were women, which is in line with the standard recommendations for gender disaggregated data collection. Forty two (25 male and 17 female) young people were interviewed about livelihood strategies, and 55 representatives from various offices were interviewed about youth migration in the region. Three focus group discussions with youth representatives were carried out in three selected Kebeles.

## Findings from the study

### The youth and their livelihood in the BER

According to CSA (2007), the total population of Oromia in 2007 was just over 27 million which accounted for 36.7% of the country's total population. The population of Oromia is primarily rural (87.8%) with a few (12.2%) classified as urban. The youth comprises about 27% (about 7.4 million) of the total population. By June 2015, the projected population of Oromia was 33.7 million, of which 4.9 million (14%) live in urban areas and 28.9M (86%) in rural areas. The fertility rate was 4.845%, which is one of the highest in the country. The BER currently (2016) has 1,694,145 people, based on projections from CSA (2007). Out of this number, the total youth population is 346,682 (20.5%) of which 181,661 (52.4%) are male and 165,021 (47.6%) are female.

Given the predominantly rural-based livelihoods of the population, natural resources (forest and farmland) are their major source of livelihood. In the BER, almost all sampled youth, albeit at different levels, rely or look for opportunities in agriculture. Nearly 80% of the 359 sampled respondents ranked crop production as their first, second, or third most important livelihood activity, and around 20% ranked crop production as their fourth or fifth (last) choice. Several youth also rely on animal rearing in addition or as an alternative to crop production.

### Migration to BER as a livelihood strategy

Migration to the BER is one of the livelihood strategies of the youth. However, neither the census nor any other official source provides current data on migration of the youth or the magnitude of "illegal" or undocumented migrants. According to the survey result of this research, from a total of 359 youth survey respondents, 26% were migrants, out of whom 44% were permanent migrants and 56% seasonal. Even this



Figure - 1. Bale Eco-Region.

percentage does not tell us the whole story since both migration and no migration areas were sampled. Most informants reported that migration to the ecoregion is increasing, particularly to the lowland agroecological zone. Migrants come from almost all areas of the Oromia Region, and even beyond that, from Amhara, Somali and southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional States. The results of both qualitative and quantitative data show that there is both a high youth population and a high influx of youth migrants to the BER.

### Impact of youth livelihood strategies on the BER

A youth population and a high migration into the BER raise questions about the impact of the youth livelihood on the BER. Both native and migrant youth consider the BER as a rich niche for making their livelihood. The qualitative study result shows that there is widespread illegal settlement in the BER, with ensuing deforestation, particularly in the lowland forested areas. Since large portions of the youth do not have land, they are triggered to clear forest for agriculture and settlement. Moreover, there is a newly growing woodwork business and small-scale enterprises in the small towns in the BER in which all of them need to make cash from the forest in the region. For example, there is unsustainable timber extraction in the ecoregion. Bamboo and other wood trees are cut down for making timber. According to the quantitative data from the survey, the majority of the youth respondents (61%) get wood from the forest in the BER either for construction or for fuel. Out



Illegal settlement villages at Dinsho District.

of these youth, the majority (63 %) obtain wood from the forest without permission from the concerned bodies. Even though both permanent and migrant youth contribute to this factor, interviews with local officials reveal that the problem is made even more complicated by involvement of “illegal” migrants and petty corruption.

## Existing policy options and Interventions

### Existing policy options

Ethiopia does not have any national or international policy on migration. This means that it also does not have a policy on ecological approaches to migration. There are only sectoral policies and strategies that tangentially touch the youth and migration issue in relation to the environment.

The 1997 Environment Policy (FDRE 1997a) under its policy on “Human Settlement, Urban Environment and Environmental Health” under subsection (a) states the aim of the policy is “To incorporate rural-urban migration, human settlement and environmental health concerns which arise from urbanization created by social and economic development into regional, district and local-level planning and development activities”. This quotation is not directly relevant to our issue, but it is what is available regarding migration and the environment. The 2004 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Youth Policy also only states that the policy aims to “Enable youth to have wide access to education, information and technological results so that they would be able to participate in environmental, natural and cultural heritages protection and preservation”, and “Create enabling conditions for the youth to participate in voluntary environmental protection and social services and thereby benefit themselves and the community at large”. Moreover, the 2003 resettlement strategy, the Micro and Small Enterprises Strategy (FDRE 1997b), and other potentially relevant areas of policy and strategy do not mention at all or only tangentially refer to the youth, their livelihood, migration and their impact on natural resources.

### Interventions

There are some interventions by Bale Zone sector offices to positively align livelihood strategies with the impact on the BER. These include participation of the youth in soil conservation practices, Participatory Forest Management (PFM), and organizing the youth in micro and small enterprises. However, our qualitative data (interview and observation) show the intervention is not to be considered entirely successful.

As of July 2015, only 5% of the youth (19, 037, of whom 14, 474 are males and 4,563 are females) in the ecoregion are engaged in small and medium enterprises. Of the total 1,981 enterprises operating in the BER, 1,623 (82%) are engaged in agriculture. Despite the employment that these enterprises generate, there are still challenges both in terms of a large number of youth that need jobs and the quality of those who have been clustered. There is limited access to credit services because this service is not available in rural areas or those who have access to it believe bank saving and credit on interest are against the Islamic teaching. Of the total 359 youth respondents, 174 (48%) do not save at all even when they are

engaged in income-generation activities, while 185 (52%) practice saving either in the bank or on Equib (a local saving mechanism), either in cash or in kind (cattle).

There are legally certified cooperatives called “Joint Forest Management (JFM) Cooperatives” or Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) responsible for forest protection and monitoring activities. These CBOs sign a “forest management agreement” with the Oromia Forest & Wildlife Enterprise (OFWE) to jointly manage the forest in their Kebeles. Youth are members of most of these CBOs and hence contribute a lot to sustainable management of forests in the ecoregion. In this way, PFM has brought positive impact in some areas including Dinsho District. However, efforts vary from Kebele to Kebele and from district to district. The problem is much bigger than these cooperatives can handle.

## Key recommendations

### Overall policy direction

Opportunities should be increased for the youth, such as a better job creation scheme. Our study suggests that basic survival is the main drive behind exploitation of resources in the BER. Migrants leave their places of origin because they seek a better adaptation strategy and are desperate in their original place. So, there should be enhanced betterment of youth economic conditions not in the BER alone but also in the places of origin of the migrants. This is a broad and comprehensive approach to the youth livelihood betterment and poverty reduction. The government is aware of this policy direction for the youth as it can be read from the Growth and Transformation Plan II (FDRE 2016).

### Specific policy measures

1. The findings show that Ethiopia has neither a separate migration policy nor a meaningful integration of ecoregions and migration into sectorial policies. A migration policy is needed to address the relationship between environment and migration, and/or there should be a solid inter-sectorial integration concerning ecoregions and migration. Since policymaking is the mandate of the federal government, it should develop comprehensive policy guidelines on migration. A balance should be found between respecting constitutional rights of free movement to start a new livelihood and maintaining the ecological sustainability of ecoregions.
2. The population policy of the country and its implementation need to be reviewed. There seems to be an inadequate effort to control rapid population growth in the BER and other areas of Oromia. Since the current population policy implements voluntary fertility control, there should be at least an enhanced campaign to access contraceptives and convince people to accept them. The practice of polygamy being common among the Muslim population is also a major factor in increasing the population in the BER.
3. As witnessed by all informants and supported by secondary data, the problem of both in-migration and out-migration is serious in

the BER; thus, creating public awareness on the consequences of migration is essential. This could be achieved through scaling up the training programs that have been started by Labor and Social Affairs Offices of the respective districts in the Bale Zone.

4. The awareness gap (mainly fear of credit services) to access saving and credit facilities that may be due to certain sociocultural components, including religious practices, should be closed or narrowed, and credit services should be facilitated for the rural youth to expand their livelihood opportunities.
5. Lack of good governance and environmental corruption were reported as major problems for misuse of land and forest in the area. The federal and regional governments should exert effort to practically reduce problems in this respect.

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## About the SHARE Bale Eco-Region project

Conservation of Biodiversity and Ecosystems Functions and Improved Well-being of Highland and Lowland Communities within the Bale Eco-Region (BER) is one of the European Union (EU)-funded projects that stands for Supporting Horn of Africa Resilience (SHARE). In Ethiopia, the project covers 16 districts (*Woredas*) in West Arsi and Bale Zones of Oromia Regional State, with around 22,000 km<sup>2</sup>, comprising a population of about 3.3 million. The life span of the project is 42 months starting in July 2014 and ending in November 2017. Five partners are implementers of the project, which are: Farm Africa, SOS Sahel, International Water Management Institute (IWMI), Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) and Population Health and Environment (PHE).



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