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Geopolitical Dynamics and Forced Migration Policies in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersection of geopolitical dynamics, in terms of contested international borders and proxy wars, with Ethiopia's de facto forced migration policies. We provide an in-depth case study of Eritrean and South Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia. Semi-structured interviews with experts on the Horn of Africa serve to identify key geopolitical turning points. Semi-structured interviews as well as focus-group discussions with refugees provide accounts of their lived experiences at different points in time. We demonstrate that the relative 'geopolitical value' of different groups to the Ethiopian government has changed over the years and substantially impacted their treatment. This, we interpret to provide evidence for how geopolitical interests affect the meeting of legal responsibilities informed by international norms. In this way, the paper contributes to the understanding of how transformative geopolitical events interact with de facto refugee policy to shape the lived experiences of refugees, informing academic discourse and policymaking.

Keywords: *geopolitics, forced migration, Eritrean refugees, South Sudanese refugees, contested borders, proxy wars, Ethiopia, Horn of Africa*

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieses Paper untersucht den Zusammenhang von geopolitischen Dynamiken, besonders mit Blick auf umstrittene internationale Grenzen und Stellvertreterkriege, und Äthiopiens umgesetzte (d.h. de facto) Politiken im Umgang mit Fluchtmigration. Es handelt sich um eine ausführliche Fallstudie über eritreische und südsudanesische Geflüchtete in Äthiopien: Anhand halbstrukturierter Interviews mit Expert*innen der Region am Horn von Afrika werden zentrale geopolitische Wendepunkte identifiziert. Zudem bieten halbstrukturierte Interviews sowie Fokusgruppendiskussionen mit Geflüchteten Einblicke in deren Lebenserfahrungen zu verschiedenen Zeitpunkten. Die Analyse zeigt, dass sich der relative 'geopolitische Wert' unterschiedlicher Gruppen für die äthiopische Regierung über die Jahre verändert und deren Behandlung maßgeblich beeinflusst hat. Dies wird als Beleg dafür interpretiert, wie geopolitische Interessen die Erfüllung völkerrechtlicher Verpflichtungen beeinträchtigen. Damit vertieft die Studie das Verständnis für die Wechselwirkungen zwischen transformativen geopolitischen Ereignissen und faktischer Geflüchtetenpolitik und liefert wichtige Erkenntnisse sowohl für den akademischen Diskurs als auch für die Politikgestaltung.

Schlagwörter: *Geopolitik, Fluchtmigration, eritreische Geflüchtete, südsudanesische Geflüchtete, umstrittene Grenzen, Stellvertreterkriege, Äthiopien, Horn von Afrika*

KEY FINDINGS

- The geopolitical context in Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa region in terms of border disputes and proxy wars with neighbouring countries has undergone tectonic shifts over the past decades. The paper explores how such geopolitical dynamics affect the treatment of different groups of refugees (Eritrean and South Sudanese) within the same geography (Ethiopia).
- We exploit semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions with governmental and non-governmental actors and with refugees collected between 2019 and 2021 to first identify transformative events and second to trace the lived experience of refugees over time. Doing so, we focus not only on contemporary developments but trace the historical roots of the Horn of Africa's geopolitical features.
- Our analytical approach rests on the observation that de jure Ethiopian refugee policy on admission, freedom of movement and access to services has remained stable over time, while the de facto treatment has been subject to change. Highlighting similarities and differences in both past handling and contemporary circumstances, we argue that the reasons for the change in de facto policies can be traced back to the shifts in regional geopolitical dynamics.
- The paper emphasises the need to consider the historical roots of geopolitical shifts if refugees' heterogeneous life experiences and treatment are to be better understood.
- Our findings also challenge the notion that gaps in refugee protection could be effectively addressed by renegotiating international norms and promoting the adoption of de jure policy regarding forced migrants in host countries.

1. Introduction

A substantial body of current geopolitical research on migration primarily examines the European Union's externalization of migration policy to non-EU countries at its external borders. However, less attention has been paid to the evolving dynamics beyond the EU's outer edges (de Blasis and Pitzalis, 2023; Zanker, 2024). In addition, some researchers dealing with migration policy further afield often perceive African countries as passively adapting their own policies to EU expectations and thus simply following European dictates (Zanker, 2024). Moreover, although there has been an increasing amount of scholarship on how geopolitical dynamics affect certain African countries' migration policies (Natter, 2014; Myadar and Dempsey, 2022; Zanker and Altrogge, 2022), a lack of case studies specifically on the East African region prevails despite its countries being key ones of origin, transit and destination.

Existing studies on the region address shortfalls in long-term socio-economic integration opportunities for refugees (Kaiser, 2006) and the impacts of hosting them (Jacobsen, 2002). While the efforts of countries such as Uganda are often cited as a key example of hosting large numbers of refugees, the approaches taken leave room for exploring other facets of refugees' lived experiences and policies (Zhou, Grossman and Ge, 2023). Similarly, in the context of Ethiopia, research on forced migration has primarily centred on international initiatives and de jure policies or general implementation gaps (e.g. Nigusie and Carver, 2019), with limited attention paid to the impact of regional geopolitical dynamics on 'de facto forced migration policies' (Massa, 2020; Vemuru, Sarkar and Fitri Woodhouse, 2020).[1]

Some studies, such as those by Feyissa (2010, 2011), examine how border-management practices – one expression of border disputes – and the cultural construction of borders influence the integration/exclusion of forced migrants. However, Massa (2020) highlights the insufficient recognition of the influence wielded by cross-border cultural similarities and social linkages on migration in East Africa with complex historical and political ties. Additionally, many works have not adequately considered how the Horn of Africa's ever-changing geopolitical contexts interact with de facto forced migration policies more generally over time.

The Horn of Africa has long been affected by interstate territorial disputes (Cardoso, 2016), and many of its states, including Ethiopia, have been embroiled in debilitating proxy wars or have supported insurgency groups undermining each other's integrity since the 1990s (Cliffe, 1999; Abbink, 2003). The growing intensity of interstate territorial disputes (Mulugeta, 2011) and armed conflicts are, indeed, defining features of the Horn of Africa's geopolitical landscape (Cardoso, 2016; Henneberg and Stapel, 2020). As forced migrants often originate from neighbouring countries caught up in border disputes and proxy wars (Konečná and Mrva 2021), their mobility and protection are often directly impacted by geopolitics. Therefore, understanding the complex relationship between these dynamics and de facto migration policies is crucial for those seeking to develop evidence-based approaches which satisfactorily address the challenges faced by East Africa's forced migrants.

Taking a long-term perspective, and Ethiopia as our case study, in the following we explore how exactly such geopolitical dynamics affect the treatment of different groups of refugees over time. First, we investigate the local geopolitical context in terms of border conflicts and proxy wars with Eritrea and Sudan. Second, we analyse de facto forced migration policies in terms of reception, mobility (restrictions) and access to services. In closing, third and finally, we underscore the need for practitioners to consider local geopolitics when developing context-sensitive approaches to forced migrants' protection in Ethiopia and beyond.

[1] As referring to the practical and lived realities of individuals and communities forced to migrate.

2. Geopolitics influence the Treatment of Refugees

Migration is strongly influenced by a multitude of geopolitical factors (Chimni, 1998; Kilkey and Ryan, 2021; Myadar and Dempsey, 2022). Those discussed in the literature encompass both geographic and non-geographic dimensions of power and competition (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; Chimni, 1998; Scholvin, 2016). The first refer to the tangible parameters of a given country or territory, including the physical space it occupies, as well as the key resources and strategically advantageous positions it can draw on – ones over which governments may seek to exert influence (Herbst, 1989). Non-geographical dimensions, meanwhile, include a range of social, ideological and cultural variables. In this study, an understanding of 'geopolitics' is used which spans, accordingly, both geographical – with competing claims over international borders – and non-geographical – such as the ideologies behind proxy wars seeking to manipulate and influence interstate relations – aspects (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; Chimni, 1998; Scholvin, 2016).

A critical geopolitical perspective is adopted to analyse the dynamic interplay between current and historical events at the macro level and refugees' everyday lived realities at the micro level. This goes beyond traditional understandings by questioning how geographical knowledge and political power are constructed and maintained (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). It focusses, as such, on the discourses which shape geopolitical realities and emphasises the key role of ideology, identity and representation in geopolitical processes (Dalby, 1991). Accordingly, we identify transformative geopolitical events both informed by and informing such narratives. Building on the work of Chimini (1998), Dowler, Sharp (2001) and Hyndman (2012), this approach helps us better grasp how state actors construct and utilise certain frames to justify their chosen courses of action.

We then analyse how these events interact with the lived experiences of refugees. The related concept of 'embodied geopolitics', as explored by Vlastou-Dimopoulou et al. (2023), enables us to decipher how Ethiopia's geopolitical strategies and narratives influence how refugees are treated and viewed. This provides the framework for examining how geopolitical relations and historical developments are embodied: that is, take form in and as refugees' everyday lives. In this context, Kilkey, Ryan (2021) and Miller (2019) emphasise the need to consider the 'situatedness' and temporality of these lived experiences. Jacobsen (1996) provides another anchor guiding our approach: namely in connecting changes in migration policy with refugees' varied experiences at different junctures.

Only a handful of studies on the relationship between geopolitics and migration policy have adopted a life-course perspective to date (Feller, 2006; Kilkey and Ryan, 2021; de Blasis and Pitzalis, 2023). Our research thus strives to broaden the evidence base by focussing on geopolitical developments, in terms of Ethiopia's border disputes and proxy wars, and their impact on refugee reception, protection and freedom of movement. This represents a vital contribution to the literature given that, as noted, territorial disputes and proxy conflicts remain both dynamic and persistent in the Horn of Africa (Hagos, 2021; Konečná and Mrva, 2021; Rudolf, 2022).

2.1 Geopolitical context

Ethiopia has a long history of serving as a destination, transit and origin country for forced migrants. The outbreak of conflict in the country's Tigray region in November 2020 deteriorated the situation of forced migrants in the country (UNHCR, 2021). [2] It also reignited the debate about shortcomings in the East African state's de facto migration policy and refugee-

[2] Taking place from 3 November 2020 to 3 November 2022, this saw armed confrontation between the Ethiopian federal government and its Eritrean allies on the one side and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on the other.

protection regime (Miller, 2022). The local geopolitical context speaks to that of the wider region. The first notable aspect here is the Horn of Africa's great geopolitical and strategic importance, as shaped by European colonisation and its repercussions (Herbst, 1989; Feyissa and Hoehne, 2010; Ikome, 2012) – including enduring interstate conflict (Feyissa and Hocehne, 2010). National borders in this region are a legacy of imperial rule, with their contested nature and ethnic divisions continuing to reverberate across time (Herbst, 1989). Those between Ethiopia and Eritrea and Ethiopia and Somalia are notable examples (Abbink, 2003; Bereketeab, 2019).

A second important aspect is the persistent recourse of the region's governments to proxy wars as an instrument of foreign policy. This practice can be traced back to the divisive techniques used by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Cliffe, 1999; Abbink, 2003). States often use proxy wars to reduce the escalatory potential for direct military confrontation with other states. This sees the backing of rebel groups or insurgencies originating on the territories of rivals, usually neighbouring countries, with the aim of undermining one's perceived adversary (Abbink, 2003) and generating greater bargaining power.

The East Africa region's geopolitical environment has also been significantly affected by the cycle of mutual entanglement between neighbours – including Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and Uganda – resulting from such proxy wars (Cliffe, 1999; Abbink, 2003; Hagos and Engler, 2023). The treatment of refugees has also been intricately linked to such shadow tactics. Chimni (1998) shows that changes in the geopolitical significance of different refugee groups, especially after the Cold War, significantly impacted both their treatment in Western countries and the latter's migration policies.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Identification strategy

Our analysis is based on semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions with governmental and non-governmental actors, as well as with refugees themselves. Our identification strategy rests on the observation that de jure Ethiopian refugee policy on admission, freedom of movement and access to services has remained stable over time.[3] To the extent that protection needs are the same or similar across groups, which we argue they are in our chosen country case, the de facto treatment of refugees should follow de jure policies. To understand the extent to which this is the case, we thus compare the situation of different refugee groups across time.

Based on this expectation of equal treatment, differential handling past and present may be testimony to a given group's changing perceived geopolitical value. For instance, some might enjoy relatively more freedom of movement, have greater chances of admission and be treated better in terms of access to services. To establish such a possibility, we identify the trajectories of different refugee groups – that is, any changes in the importance attached to them, as expressed in evolving government narratives – and compare them to their de facto treatment over time. This is in line with qualitative process-tracing approaches (Collier, 2011; King, Keohane and Verba, 2021).

3.2 Case selection and data

Due to their sizeable presence among Ethiopia's overall refugee population, we focus henceforth on individuals from Eritrea and South Sudan. As of July 2024, 1,064,587 refugees and asylum-seekers were

[3] In compliance with the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention, the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, Ethiopia has consistently upheld refugees' prima facie acceptance, freedom of movement and access to essential services and legal protection de jure. The only significant change came in 2019, when refugees were granted longer-term integration opportunities, including pathways to naturalisation (Hagos, 2021) which are, however, not the policy areas under consideration here.

registered in Ethiopia, making it the third-largest host country for refugees in Africa (UNHCR, 2024). South Sudanese account for 40% of all refugees in the country, Eritreans for 17% (UNHCR, 2024).

Together with local partners, the first author collected the empirical data. The purpose of the focus-group discussions was to gain insight into the lived experiences of a particular group of refugees across time. We used open-ended interviews to cover the most relevant topics, but doing so also allowed us to explore newly arising themes and issues. Experts reviewed the interview guide beforehand to ensure it included key themes and questions. Table 1 below provides a comprehensive overview of our data sources, detailing the specific information extracted from each.

Data collection took place in three stages. In the first phase, occurring between September and November 2019, we conducted semi-structured interviews with six experts on international relations, forced migration and the Horn of Africa. Our goal was to deepen our understanding of local geopolitical developments across time (see also Hagos, 2021) as well as to identify any overlooked trends and trajectories potentially impacting our analysis. In the second phase between September 2019 and November 2020 and in the third phase between November 2020 and February 2021, subsequently focussed on the lived experiences of South Sudanese and Eritrean refugees respectively, as well as their entanglements with the transformative geopolitical processes playing out regionally.

Via snowball sampling, we identified and reached out to refugees who had lived in Ethiopia during each time period identified by our consulted experts. In the second data-collection stage, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 South Sudanese refugees September 2019 and November 2020 and held five focus-group discussions between November and December 2019. In the third stage, with data collection now involving work with Eritrean refugees, we carried out semi-structured interviews

Table 1. Overview of methods and data sources

Method	On geopolitical context	On de facto migration policies (lived experiences)
Semi-structured interviews with civil servants, aid workers, media personnel and academics	Interviews with six experts from September to November 2019 in the Gambella region and Addis Ababa	
Focus-group discussion with host and South Sudanese communities		Five focus-group discussions conducted from November to December 2019 in Gambella
Semi-structured interviews with refugees from Eritrea and South Sudan		A total of 27 forced migrants took part in interviews organised into two rounds: I. November 2020 to February 2021, with 10 Eritreans in Addis Ababa II. September 2019 to November 2020, with 15 South Sudanese in Gambella

with ten refugees between November 2020 and February 2021. All interviews and focus-group discussions took place in Ethiopia. The purpose of the latter was to take into consideration also people's collective memories as well as to zoom in on interlocutors' evolving circumstances across time. Notably, our interview partners not only offered evidence on their changing situations but also their perceived reasons for them.

We used a content-analysis approach to code and categorise the data collected. The categories were organised around the developing geopolitical dynamics in Ethiopia (participation in international conflicts and proxy wars) and responses to forced migrants from Eritrea and South Sudan (admission, freedom of movement, access to services). We inductively formed categories which allowed us to gain insight into how geopolitical developments and trajectories over time intersect with Ethiopia's de facto forced migration policy.

4. Ethiopia's de facto Treatment of Refugees

In what follows, we first detail the situation of Eritrean migrants before then taking an in-depth look at their (South) Sudanese peers.[4] In both cases we do so by invoking different time periods which our experts substantiated as relevant to understand or marking critical junctures.

4.1 The case of Eritrean migrants

4.1.1 1991–1998: Cordial relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea

Following the overthrow of Ethiopia's Marxist government in 1991, cordial relations briefly ensued between Ethiopia and Eritrea through 1998 (Int Exp2). Together, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)[5] and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front brought down the socialist regime, marking a significant turning point in the history of both countries (Mulugeta, 2011). This represents, as such, a meaningful place to begin.

Eritrea proclaimed its independence in 1991, and Ethiopia's TPLF-led regime recognised it as a sovereign country. The two countries subsequently collaborated to restore economic ties and bolster infrastructure (Int Exp2). According to one interlocutor, Eritrean independence allowed both countries to reassess their historical ties, which in turn affected geopolitical dynamics (Int Exp1).

At that time, Eritrean migrants living in Ethiopia were accepted into the public service. Residence permits were widely granted, allowing them to live and work legally in Ethiopia without having to navigate extensive bureaucratic hurdles. This legal status would be instrumental in helping these individuals

[4] For the data analysis, it is useful to not restrict ourselves to the legal category of 'refugees'. We acknowledge the complexity and uncertainty of distinguishing between the upheld 'refugee' and 'migrant' categorisations, particularly for those living along former colonial borders. By going beyond rigid legal definitions, this approach recognises the porosity of borders and the fluidity with which individuals can move between different legal categories, reflecting the complexity of their lived circumstances.

[5] Member of the ruling coalition the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the TPLF dominated Ethiopia's political landscape for nearly three decades (1991–2018) (Lefort, 2018).

establish a stable life in their host country. Freedom of movement was another crucial aspect of the Eritrean migrant experience during this period. Eritreans were permitted to travel and participate in a multitude of social, cultural and economic activities in Ethiopia. This enabled them to easily integrate into the latter's society and form strong bonds with their Ethiopian counterparts (Int Ref1Addis).

Additionally, ease of access to services such as healthcare, education and legal support was ensured. Although there were some gaps and challenges in drawing on these services, the government's commitment to supporting the Eritrean community helped them integrate into the host society and lead stable lives (Int Ref2Addis). Eritrean migrants also had the opportunity to engage in trade and other forms of economic activity. The Ethiopian government provided the necessary legal framework and support for them to start and run their own businesses, contribute to the local economy and become self-sufficient. Despite some challenges, such as limited access to financial services and occasional bureaucratic issues, the overall environment was conducive to entrepreneurial endeavour (Int Ref3Addis).

4.1.2 1998–2000: Ethiopia and Eritrea go to war

In 1998, the onset of military conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea marked a crucial turning point in the region's continued stability and in the lives of Eritrean migrants' resident in Ethiopia. Following the outbreak of violence, the Ethiopian government imposed de facto movement restrictions on Eritrean migrants, limited their access to public services and threatened to withdraw physical and legal protections (Int Exp3). As a result, many Eritreans found themselves in a highly precarious situation (Int Ref3Addis).

Moreover, some Ethiopians of Eritrean ancestry and other Eritrean passport holders were arbitrarily detained and deported (Int Ref2Addis). One interviewee reported that the families of Ethiopians of Eritrean descent were torn apart and that others were excluded from the effective exercising of citizenship rights, especially in the case of those Eritreans now arbitrarily fired (Int Ref1Addis). An Eritrean who worked as a teacher in Ethiopia before the war broke out described the experience of Eritrean migrants during their subsequent expulsion as follows:

> *'The federal government sent out a virtually unconditional directive to expel Eritrean citizens from different regional states and the capital. Some Ethiopian citizens with Eritrean family backgrounds were also included. The situations were terrifying, some of us were held under a state of siege, and, after a few days, we found ourselves in different buses. Tens of thousands of Eritreans were expelled en masse; we were trucked to the border with Eritrea.' (Int Ref4Addis)*

An Eritrean migrant who personally experienced expulsion described it as 'terrifying'; the justification for such measures was cited as the maintenance of national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Int Ref1Addis). Despite the Citizenship Proclamation's opposition to arbitrary deprivation of citizenship, the passports of numerous Ethiopians of Eritrean descent were revoked without the opportunity for legal recourse (Manby, 2016). In this regard, Prime Minister Meles Zanawi's speech sums up the Ethiopian government's attitude towards Eritrean migrants at the time. On 9 July 1998, he informed the national media that those expelled were foreigners who were in Ethiopia only because of the government's generosity. 'If we tell them to go because of the colour of their irises, they have to go' (Human Rights Watch, 2003). War, as such, not only destabilised the region but also caused suffering for Eritrean migrants and Ethiopians of Eritrean descent, with far-reaching consequences.

4.1.3 2000–2018: No peace, no war

The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission was established following the Algiers Agreement in December 2000, which signalled a permanent cessation of hostilities between the two countries. The Commission was tasked with delimiting and demarcating the border on the basis of the relevant colonial treaties (1900, 1902 and 1908) and

international law.[6] However, its decision could not be implemented as Ethiopia refused to accept the Commission's decision, which awarded the disputed territory to Eritrea (Abbink, 2003; Bereketeab, 2010, 2019; Müller, 2012). From 2000 to 2018, Ethiopia's refusal to honour its promises led to a persistent state of 'no peace, no war' between the two countries (Int Exp1; Int Exp2).

On the one hand, during a protracted proxy conflict between the two countries, they both provided financial, logistical, and military support to insurgents attempting to undermine each other over the course of nearly two decades (Int Exp3), ultimately serving to deepen their diplomatic rift. As described by Abbink (2003), this indirect engagement allowed them to weaken their adversary without the risk of direct military confrontation. In consequence, any prospect of peaceful resolution was rendered increasingly difficult (Int Exp2).

On the other hand, despite the tense geopolitical wrangling with the Eritrean regime, the Ethiopian government took measures to improve relations with Eritrean community members, allowing deportees to return and reclaim their property (Campbell, 2013). In addition, Ethiopia granted those fleeing Eritrea asylum (Int Exp3). During this period the latter would grow more autocratic, repressing dissent and extending its forceful military-conscription programme indefinitely (Massa, 2020). This compelled tens of thousands of Eritreans to seek shelter within their neighbour's borders (Massa, 2020). To this end, personal testimonies reveal the perilous journeys and many challenges faced by Eritreans crossing the border into Ethiopia between 2000 and 2018. Many braved rough terrain, human traffickers and the risk of being caught by border guards in their quest for safety. Despite these dangers, a determination to escape the oppressive Eritrean regime was evident in their willingness to even embark on such a gruelling endeavour (Int Ref7Addis).

Upon arrival, Eritrean refugees were welcomed and supported by the Ethiopian government and international organisations such as UNHCR. The registration process and the automatic granting of refugee status provided a sense of relief and security. Afterwards, the majority were resettled in refugee camps. Despite certain challenges due to overcrowding and limited resources, they were able to access services here such as healthcare, education and food (Int Ref6Addis).

Additionally, prior to its new 2019 refugee law Ethiopia had had a strict camp policy, although those who showed that they were able to cover their own expenses, did not want to receive humanitarian aid or had an Ethiopian sponsor were allowed to live in its towns and cities (Atrafi, 2017). Between 2000 and 2018 the 'out-of-camp refugee programme' – mainly implemented for Eritreans – provided opportunities to access resources and achieve integration in urban areas (Int Ref5Addis; Int Ref6Addis). This programme was introduced as an alternative to camp-based assistance for displaced Eritreans living in Ethiopia, allowing them to be accommodated beyond refugee camps. Ethiopia's commitment to rebuilding its ties with its Eritrean residents and the geopolitical importance of these refugees to challenging the Eritrean regime were among the main reasons for such accommodating treatment (Int Exp2). Nonetheless, complaints surfaced about the preferential treatment of certain individuals here:

> *'Compared to Eritrean refugees who had no involvement with Ethiopia-based Eritrean opposition parties, those directly linked with these parties were able to access urban services more swiftly between 2000 and 2018. Few Eritreans who could prove their independence were able to find housing in cities. However, the majority of those affiliated with the opposition parties based in Ethiopia had the chance to access urban support services as well as live in urban areas.' (Int Ref5Addis)*

[6] Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission. 2002. Decision regarding delimitation of the border between the State of Eritrea and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. https://www.refworld.org/jurisprudence/caselaw/eebcom/2002/en/69283, accessed [20.08.2024].

Moreover, the relative freedom of movement experienced by Eritreans living in Ethiopia allowed them to interact with locals and other refugees, fostering a sense of community. However, the inability to engage in economic activities or establish businesses significantly limited their self-sufficiency and full integration (Int Ref6Addis; Int Ref7Addis). Despite the challenges and gaps in service provision, however, some Eritrean refugees expressed gratitude for the support and assistance received from the Ethiopian government and international organisations (Int Ref6Addis). It enabled them to rebuild their lives and have hope for the future. The resilience of these refugees highlights their potential for successful integration and significant contribution to their host communities if given the appropriate opportunities and resources (Int Ref7Addis).

4.1.4 2018–2022: Rapprochement

The year 2018 would see a highly significant change in Ethiopia's political leadership: Abiy Ahmed took over as prime minister, leading to a series of momentous geopolitical shifts at home and in the wider region. This transfer of power facilitated a rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, leading to a normalisation of diplomatic relations between the two countries once more. This ended the long-standing, destabilising proxy war playing out between them (Int Exp1).

The geopolitical significance attributed to Eritrean refugees would shift again in consequence. The Eritrean regime argues that Ethiopia's automatic admission of Eritrean asylum-seekers is a pull factor encouraging Eritrean youth to flee their native country.[7] Since 2018, however, the new Ethiopian federal government has prioritised strengthening its alliance and relationship with the Eritrean regime, which implied allowing Eritrean forces – from which refugees had fled – onto Ethiopian soil. This negatively affected not only those seeking shelter but also Ethiopia's upholding of international norms (Int Exp3).

The thaw between the two countries initially gave renewed hope to many; as the relationship between the two governments evolved, however, so did conditions for refugees (Int Exp3). The closure of border crossings in early 2019 and changes in reception policy left many refugees in limbo, unsure of their future. Revised de facto asylum procedures for Eritreans now undermined access, denying, among others, unaccompanied children the protection they needed (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Additionally, in March 2020 a plan was circulated to close one of the four refugee camps situated in the Tigray region (Hitsats) and to relocate residents to other Ethiopian camps elsewhere against their will (Marks, 2020). Although these developments were the cause of great fear, Eritreans continued to seek asylum in Ethiopia up until 2020 (Int Ref8Addis). As of the middle of that year, the situation there was still better than in Eritrea, where many people continue to face persecution, conscription and a lack of access to basic services (Int Ref9Addis).

Nonetheless, the situation in Ethiopia worsened again in the period from November 2020 to November 2022, when armed conflict broke out between the federal government and Tigray armed forces. Prior to the recent war, close to 90,000 Eritreans lived in Tigray's refugee camps in relative safety (UNHCR, 2020). However, they subsequently became the target of all warring factions (Int Ref8Addis), leading to the destruction of the camps and a significant loss of life (Miller, 2022).

In March 2021, the United Nations found that the two refugee camps of Hitsats (pre-conflict: 25,248 residents) and Shimelba (pre-conflict: 8,702) had been devastated and abandoned. The whereabouts of thousands of refugees remains unclear (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Some of those affected had done military service in Eritrea before fleeing to Ethiopia. They feared that those who escaped conscription and military service would face jail time and torture for leaving the country and abandoning

[7] e.g. Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2014). 'UNHCR is part of the problem of illegal migration. Eritrean position on the flight of refugees from Eritrean.' See: https://tesfanews.net/eritrea-says-unhcr-is-part-of-the-problem-of-illegal-migration/.

their posts. UNHCR expressed its grave concern for their safety (Rudolf, 2022). The statement issued by the agency underscores its concern over reports that Eritrean refugees were being killed in Tigray as well as kidnapped and forcibly returned to Eritrea (Miller, 2022).

Some Eritreans who trekked to neighbouring regions in Ethiopia from Tigray's camps would bear witness to the dire humanitarian situation there and the horror of having been caught in the crossfire (Int Ref9Addis). One interviewee explained that after the destruction of Hitsats, including by Eritrea's armed forces, some had to endure highly precarious journeys to make it to Addis Ababa. On 11 December 2020, however, the Ethiopian government announced its determination to return Eritrean refugees now living in the capital to the camps they had recently fled in Tigray (Int Ref10Addis). Miller (2022) confirms that, by the end of 2020, the Ethiopian government had forcibly escorted them back there.

4.2 The case of South Sudanese forced migrants

4.2.1 1980–1991: Sporadic military clashes

From 1980 to 1991, Ethiopian–Sudanese geopolitics were marked by border disputes, proxy wars and the mutual supporting of rebel groups working to undermine these respective countries (Int Ref2Gam). Although the contestation surrounding the north-eastern part of Ethiopia's international border with Sudan (Al Fashaga) did not result in full-scale military conflict, the impasse reached in negotiations prompted the two countries to engage in proxy warfare instead (Int Exp2). Both attempted to advance their strategic claims by supporting insurgency groups based on each other's territory. Ethiopia specifically here backed the South Sudan Liberation Movement (SPLA) in its fight against Sudan, thereby endorsing South Sudan's struggle for independence (Int Exp5). This active involvement in the Sudan–South Sudan conflict exacerbated armed hostilities in the early 1980s, as resulting in over 300,000 forced migrants fleeing to the Gambella region of Ethiopia (Int Exp5). The refugee camp established in the region's Itang district would serve as the primary mass support base for the South Sudanese independence movement (Int Exp2; see also Kurimoto, 2005; Feyissa, 2011).

At that time, Sudanese refugees were automatically accepted as refugees in Ethiopia if they crossed its borders in search of shelter. Freedom of movement was another crucial aspect here. These individuals were permitted to travel and participate in a multitude of social, cultural and economic activities in Ethiopia (Int Ref3Gam; FGD1; FGD2). Although hosted in refugee camps, some of those concerned were also allowed to establish their own settlement areas and go about their lives among the local host communities (Int Ref4Gam; FGD1). One of the interviewees described his experience as follows:

> *'Our freedom of movement and residence in the Gambella region of Ethiopia was relatively unrestricted in the early 1980s. We were able to move around the region and build our lives without much interference from the authorities. For example, some of the refugees who arrived in Itang district set up their settlement sites outside the refugee camps and between local communities.' (Int Ref1Gam)*

4.2.2 1991–1995: Strained relations

After Ethiopia's change of regime in 1991, ties between it and the SPLA would turn sour (Int Exp1). This was the consequence of the new Ethiopian government now attempting to improve bilateral relations with neighbouring Sudan, leading to its suspension of support for the SPLA and the South Sudanese independence movement at large (Rolandsen, 2005). Tensions further escalated after military skirmishes between the two sides, including a 1992 SPLA attack on Ethiopian forces and civilians in Itang district (Regassa, 2010). Ethiopia responded by targeting SPLA positions and cutting off logistical supplies to South Sudan (Int Exp2). Because the South Sudanese refugee settlements in Ethiopia during this period were often perceived as doubling up as SPLA bases, strained relations between the host government and the rebel movement directly impacted Ethiopia's handling of forced migrants from its neighbouring country (Int Exp1).

The de facto restrictions imposed on these individuals subsequently increased. As a result, first, many thousands – mostly those from the Nuer ethnic group – returned to Sudan in fear of revenge attacks by the new Ethiopian regime (Int Ref6Gam). Second, the Ethiopian government enforced a stringent camp policy restricting South Sudanese refugees' freedom of movement and place of residence. In several cases, and again affecting particularly Nuer people, many were rounded up and relocated to refugee centres beyond the Gambella region (Int Ref5Gam). The frequent accidental involvement of Ethiopians of Nuer descent in these raids demonstrates the indiscriminate nature of these actions. Even some Nuer Ethiopian nationals were, as such, taken to waiting stations to be searched, in attempting to identify who were citizens and who were not among those gathered up (Int Ref7Gam). Afterwards, those deemed undesirable were sent to refugee camps in the Assossa region of Ethiopia, more than 400 kilometres away from Gambella (Feyissa, 2011).

Moreover, and third, the suspension of prima facie asylum practices at the border crossings between Ethiopia and South Sudan complicated the admission process for those seeking shelter during this troubled period (Int Exp1). This de facto change made it more difficult for asylum-seekers from South Sudan to gain legal recognition and protection in Ethiopia. In addition, between 1991 and 1995, restrictions on free movement and their confinement to camps made it virtually impossible for refugees to engage in economic activities such as starting a business or taking up employment (Int Ref5Gam).

4.2.3 Post-1995: A new horizon

Hopes for improved relations between Ethiopia and Sudan were shattered in the mid-1990s, as the EPRDF's efforts to improve ties with its neighbour fell flat, while backing for South Sudan's independence movement gained ground once more in consequence (Young, 1999). The continued border skirmishes between Ethiopian and Sudanese militias further strained relations between the two states (Young, 1999; Rolandsen, 2005). The attempted assassination of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa in 1995 saw Ethiopia–Sudan ties further deteriorate.[8] As a result, the EPRDF stepped up its support for South Sudanese insurgents once more, particularly the SPLA, and engaged in a renewed proxy war with Sudan. One interlocutor recounted the following:

> *'After 1995, relations between the SPLA and the Ethiopian government improved, fuelled by escalating tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan. Ethiopia increased its support for the SPLA, viewing the group as an ally against Sudanese activity along disputed international borders. (Int Exp2)'*

Strained relations between the Ethiopian government and Sudan, as well as renewed links between the SPLA and the EPRDF, would be accompanied by changes in de facto policy towards South Sudanese forced migrants currently living in both refugee camps and villages in Gambella (Int Exp1). Between 1996 and 2002, as the war between the SPLA and the Sudanese government intensified, Ethiopia opened its borders to those fleeing the violence and automatically granted them asylum (Int Exp4; FGD3). Upon arrival, those concerned were relocated to nearby refugee camps in Gambella, where they had access to services such as healthcare, monthly food rations, schools and basic water and sanitation facilities (Int Ref8Gam; FGD3). Additionally, they enjoyed relative freedom of movement within the region (Int Ref9Gam; FGD3). However, efforts by the Ethiopian government and its implementing partners to support self-sufficiency or foster long-term solutions were very limited. This means that refugees were not able to establish businesses or engage in economic activity while living in these camps (Int Ref10Gam; FGD3).

[8] Gunmen belonging to a Sudanese Islamist group ambushed Mubarak's motorcade as he arrived for a 1995 summit of African leaders, events seeing him narrowly escape death.

4.2.4 2011–present: Good relations with post-independence South Sudan

Since South Sudan's independence in 2011, the Ethiopian government has maintained cordial relations with the nascent state. The two countries have worked together to build mutual trust, understanding, reciprocity and equality over time (Int Exp6). Efforts to strengthen their diplomacy and economic cooperation have served as the cornerstone of peaceful and stable ties. Additionally, they have together launched important infrastructure projects connecting the two countries via Gambella (Int Exp4).

Aside from opening the relevant roads to enable humanitarian aid to enter South Sudan, Ethiopia also took in nearly half a million refugees, hosting them in various camps in Gambella, following its newly founded neighbour being plunged into a seven-year civil war from December 2013 (Hagos, 2021). One interviewee described their recollection of the admission process for those impacted as follows:

> *'Upon arrival, I was taken to a reception centre where I underwent the first level of registration. I was provided with basic necessities such as biscuits, water and emergency medical aid. After a few days, I was transported to a nearby refugee camp, where I underwent secondary registration, including the provision of biometric data. The Ethiopian government automatically granted me refugee status, which came as a great relief. (Int Ref15Gam)'*

After admission, these refugees also had the option of relocating to camps and gaining access to a range of essential services there. The Ethiopian government, together with its international partners, provided healthcare, shelter, monthly rations and education to those housed in Gambella's camps (Int Ref14Gam; FGD3). This represented a noticeable change to the circumstances of previous years.

5. Comparative Perspectives

Figure *1* below depicts the changes occurring vis-à-vis Ethiopia's de facto admission policy, facilitating of freedom of movement and provision of access to services, as well as in the geopolitical trajectories for both of our examined refugee groups (Eritreans and South Sudanese) over time. Consistency of de jure policy would imply that the lines should always be expected to be on the top, indicating a prima facie admission process, relative freedom of movement and ease of access to services. The variation in these lines over time provides, accordingly, a figurative depiction of how Ethiopia's de facto treatment of refugees has in fact deviated from de jure stipulations. Our interview data suggests that some changes in de facto treatment have been abrupt (e.g. admission) whereas other have been more gradual (e.g. access to services), with some heterogeneity when it comes to those Eritrean and South Sudanese refugees who would first be affected by the outlined geopolitical developments (e.g. as a result of their exact geographical origins or political affiliations). This is in line with our theoretical expectations.

Regarding the treatment of forced migrants from Eritrea, between 1991 and 1998 they indeed enjoyed in Ethiopia physical and legal protection, freedom of movement, access to services and they were allowed to work in public sector jobs. With the beginning of the dispute culminating in the outbreak of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea over their international borders in 1998, however, the situation for Eritrean forced migrants deteriorated. The willingness of Ethiopia to accept Eritrean asylum-seekers, open the public service to them and ensure their safety and well-being stands in stark contrast to its restrictive asylum policy during the Ethiopian–Eritrean border conflicts of 1998–2002. As we do not observe any changes in the de jure situation or in the parallel treatment of South Sudanese refugees during the same period time, we argue that it was the events related to border conflicts between the Ethiopia and Eritrean governments which led to this de facto political reaction. This included the deportation of

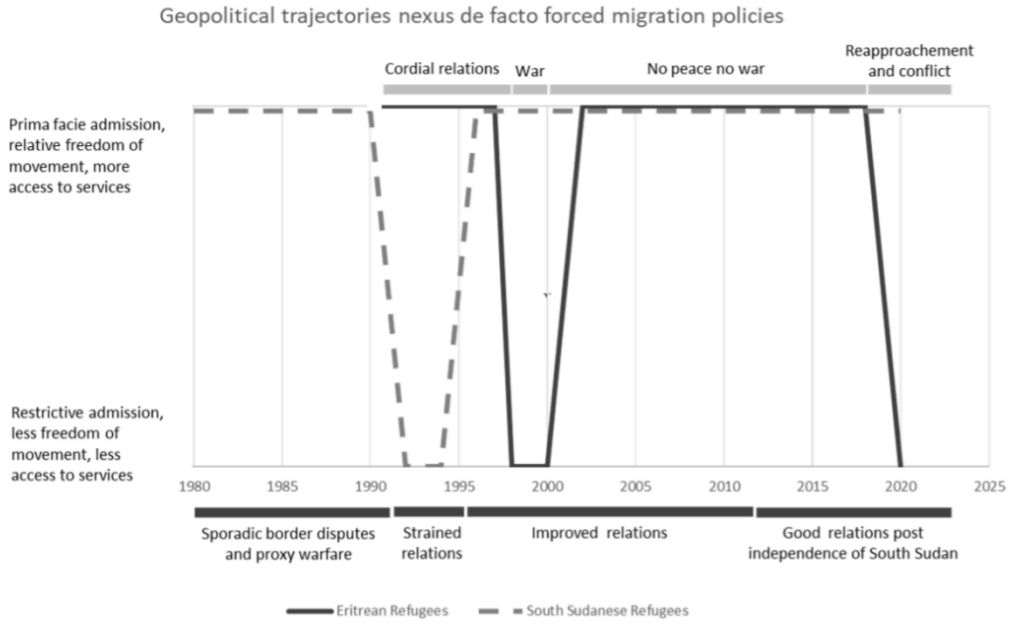

Figure 1. The nexus of geopolitics and de facto forced migration policy (1980–present) © DeZIM

Eritrean refugees to their country of origin, their detention, restriction of movement and ill-treatment.

This precarious situation for forced migrants from Eritrea would improve noticeably after 2002. Again, we argue that the change in the treatment of those concerned was due to the involvement of the Ethiopian government in a proxy war [9] with the Eritrean regime between 2002 and 2018. In particular, as part of mobilising support for its shadow conflict with the latter, the EPRDF improved ties with Eritreans hosted in Ethiopia. This created opportunities for them to benefit from access to services beyond just the camps, while newly fleeing Eritreans were automatically granted asylum.

After establishing a strong alliance against TPLF-led forces in the Tigray region in 2020, however, the Ethiopian government – at the behest of Eritrea – suspended the prima facie reception of refugees from the latter. In addition to its involvement in the Tigray conflict, the Eritrean regime is accused of destroying refugee camps and forcing Eritreans there to return to their native country. Contrary to its legal responsibility to protect refugees, in practice the Ethiopian regime condoned herewith human rights violations, the denial of humanitarian aid and forced repatriation. Our analysis suggests that, after 2018, Eritrean refugees would once more lose their geopolitical value to the Ethiopian government: that is, they no longer provided benefits regarding proxy warfare while the Ethiopia–Eritrea border dispute was no longer an active issue.

The case of South Sudanese refugees, meanwhile, further substantiates the relationship between geopolitical events and de facto reception, freedom of movement and access to services over time. In the early 1980s, when Ethiopia was embroiled in a proxy war in Sudan, refugees from there carried significant geopolitical value for the Marxist regime. During that time, they enjoyed better protection, were taken in

[9] Recalling the nature of a proxy war, they are used to reduce the escalatory potential for direct military confrontation with other states. In this, refugees are used strategically, explaining their geopolitical value and therewith the improved de facto treatment. In contrast, border conflicts are direct conflicts and refugees from the opposing country are seen as potential threats, explaining the de facto bad treatment.

on prima facie basis and were granted access to services. Between 1991 and 1995, however, refugees from what would later become South Sudan lost their geopolitical significance as they were no longer needed to help sustain the aforementioned proxy war. The now-strained relationship between Ethiopia and the SPLA contributed to the restriction of movement imposed on South Sudanese refugees and their negative treatment in Ethiopia during this period.

Aside from how trends in the treatment of the same refugee groups have changed over time with shifts in geopolitical dynamics in both Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa region, we would now like to substantiate our arguments by looking at current practice in dealing with these two groups of refugees. Although de jure the same policies and laws governed and govern the rights of Eritrean and South Sudanese refugees, the two groups are treated differently in practice. The strong alliance of the Ethiopian and Eritrean regimes against the rebels in the Tigray region was linked to the former's recent accession to the latter's long-running demands to halt the prima facie admission of asylum-seekers from Eritrea. Those who opposed the Eritrean regime and fled to Ethiopia currently face significant harassment and restrictions on free movement. In addition, the Eritrean regime is implicated in human rights abuses against Eritrean refugees currently hosted in Ethiopia.

In contrast, the current relationship between the Ethiopian and South Sudanese governments is characterised by a strong, cordial relationship, mutual trust and the absence of proxy warfare. We associate these more stable geopolitical dynamics with the accompanying positive reception, treatment and protection of South Sudanese asylum-seekers in Ethiopia following the onset of civil war in 2013. Together with its international partners, the latter's government provided access to services for South Sudanese refugees and ensured their physical and legal protection.

6. Discussion

This research provides insights into the experiences of forced migrants taking up residence in particular regions of Ethiopia. However, there are several limitations to our work which need to be acknowledged: The study relies on retrospective data over a long period of time, and the inherent biases associated with memory recall could affect the validity of this information. For this reason, we also outlined the varied treatment of different (national) refugee groups in current times, thus as unaffected by such recall bias. Our research mainly focusses on refugee reception, mobility and access to services in Ethiopia. It is important to recognise the heterogeneity of refugee experiences. Some forced migrants have used social networks to enhance their life circumstances and facilitate their integration into local host communities. Our method of data collection was not designed to capture the diversity of refugee experiences beyond systematic differences across the (national) groups under consideration. In addition, the research is geographically limited and based on only two regions, which may limit the diversity of experiences recorded. Furthermore, future studies could potentially adopt a mixed-methods approach to capture a broader range of perspectives on service utilisation, as well as diverse accounts of reception processes and long-term integration.

With all these caveats in mind, we implemented strategies to mitigate such limitations and enhance the reliability and validity of our research. These include focussing on regions with a high population density vis-à-vis Ethiopia's refugee population – ones hosting over 65% thereof – to obtain a sample aiming to be as representative of these individuals as possible. We also used triangulation to improve the richness and validity of our data, while supplementing our semi-structured interviews with focus-group discussions – further to drawing on secondary data, too, for a more thorough analysis.

7. Conclusion

Recognising that the geopolitical context in Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa region in terms of border disputes and proxy wars with neighbouring countries has undergone tectonic shifts, the study critically examined these trajectories and analysed the de facto forced migration policies ensuing herewith during the last four decades. Highlighting the similarities and differences in both past handling and contemporary circumstances, it was argued that the grounds for changing de facto policies can indeed be traced back to the shifts occurring in regional geopolitical dynamics. This refers to evolution in terms of refugee reception, freedom of movement and access to services, as well as more general treatment in terms of suffering human rights violations or not.

Our findings are also relevant in the context of wider migration diplomacy and EU externalisation policies. 'Externalisation' refers to extra-territorial measures taken by states to prevent migrants from entering their jurisdictions (Frelick, Kysel and Podkul, 2016), as reflecting a shift towards containment and preventative protection (Hyndman, 2012).

This revised approach is evident in the numerous international agreements now incentivising non-European countries to 'keep at bay' migration flows passing through their national territories, as they significantly influence contemporary geopolitical landscapes (Hyndman and Mountz, 2008; de Blasis and Pitzalis, 2023). As we have shown in the Ethiopian case, the willingness of states to protect the rights of migrants is conditional on such developments.

The paper has emphasised the need to consider the historical roots to geopolitical shifts if refugees' heterogeneous life experiences and treatment are to be better understood. The key role of African states in protecting refugees and managing migration flows is often underestimated, being seen as but passively conforming to European paradigms rather than as actively shaping de facto migration policies based on their own interests and agency (Adam et al., 2020; Zanker and Altrogge, 2022). Adding to this line of scholarship, we have sought to challenge the notion that gaps in refugee protection could be effectively addressed by renegotiating international norms and promoting the adoption of de jure policy regarding forced migrants resident in host countries.

Appendices

Table 2. **Interviews with Experts**

Short Code	Position /institute	Place of interview	Date
Int Exp1	INGO	Addis Ababa	30.9.2019
Int Exp2	NGO	Gambella	28.9.2019
Int Exp3	UN agency	Addis Ababa	15.10.2019
Int Exp4	Governmental organisation	Gambella	16.9.2019
Int Exp5	Journalist	Gambella	10.9.2019
Int Exp6	Academic	Gambella	10.10.2019

Table 3. **Interviews with Eritrean Refugees**

Short Code	Status	Place of interview	Date
Int Ref1Addis	Former deportee	Addis Ababa	11.12.2020
Int Ref2Addis	Refugee	Addis Ababa	20.12.2020
Int Ref3Addis	Refugee	Addis Ababa	12.10.2020
Int Ref4Addis	Refugee	Addis Ababa	28.12.2020
Int Ref5Addis	Refugee	Addis Ababa	21.12.2020
Int Ref6Addis	Refugee	Addis Ababa	5.2.2021
Int Ref7Addis	Refugee	Addis Ababa	27.12.2020
Int Ref8Addis	Refugee	Addis Ababa	2.2.2021
Int Ref9Addis	Refugee	Addis Ababa	15.1.2021
Int Ref10Addis	Refugee	Addis Ababa	24.11.2020

Table 4. **Interviews with South Sudanese Refugees**

Short Code	Status	Place of interview	Date
Int Ref1Gam	Refugee (mid-1980s and 1990s)	Gambella	28.11.2019
Int Ref2Gam	Refugee (mid-1980s and 1990s)	Gambella	28.11.2019
Int Ref3Gam	Refugee (mid-1980s and 1990s)	Gambella	20.9.2019
Int Ref4Gam	Refugee (mid-1980s and 1990s)	Gambella	16.11.2019
Int Ref5Gam	Refugee (1991–1995)	Gambella	20.12.2019
Int Ref6Gam	Refugee (1991–1995)	Gambella	26.12.2019
Int Ref7Gam	Refugee (1991–1995)	Gambella	20.11.2019
Int Ref8Gam	Refugee (1996–2011)	Gambella	8.11.2019
Int Ref9Gam	Refugee (1996–2011)	Gambella	17.11.2019
Int Ref10Gam	Refugee (1996–2011)	Gambella	22.11.2019
Int Ref11Gam	Refugee after the 2013 conflict	Gambella	20.9.2019
Int Ref12Gam	Refugee after the 2013 conflict	Gambella	10.11.2019
Int Ref13Gam	Refugee after the 2013 conflict	Gambella	23.11.2019
Int Ref14Gam	Refugee after the 2013 conflict	Gambella	4.11.2019
Int Ref15Gam	Refugee after the 2013 conflict	Gambella	6.11.2020

Table 5. Focus-Group Discussions with South Sudanese Refugees

Short Code	Location	Number of participants per age group				Number of camp-based refugee representatives participating		Total number of participants	Date
		Youth (15–35)		Adult (35+)					
		Gender				Gender			
		M	F	M	F	M	F		
FGD1	Itang, Gambella	1	2	4	3	2	2	10	03.11.2019
FGD2	Itang, Gambella	1	2	3	1	1	1	7	04.11.2019
FGD3	Kuhle refugee camp, Gambella	1	2	2	2	1	1	7	02.11.2019
FGD4	Tirkidi refugee camp, Gambella	2	1	3	1	1	1	7	02.11.2019
FGD5	Pinyudo, Gambella	2	2	2	2	1	1	8	08.12.2019

Ethiopia's de jure migration policy

Formal stipulations governing the reception and treatment of refugees in Ethiopia, as well as the related institutional arrangements, have remained steady over time (Maru, 2019). In particular, regulations concerning admission, freedom of movement and access to services have been in place since the 1980s. Ethiopia inscribed these rules in accordance with its obligations under the African Refugee Convention (1969 OAU Convention) and the 1951 Refugee Convention (Hagos, 2021).

In 2004, Ethiopia began efforts to codify its international obligations into national law. Regarding admission, free movement and access to services, the 2004 revision to Ethiopia's de jure policy maintained the same tone and approach as that of the 1980s. Both iterations are based on the prima facie principle, as predicated on the automatic granting of refugee status to asylum-seekers from neighbouring states based on the readily apparent and objective circumstances faced in their countries of origin (Abebe, 2018). However, the 2004 Refugee Act does not go far enough vis-à-vis ensuring the long-term social inclusion of refugees in their host state (Maru, 2019).

Since 2016, Ethiopia has pledged to implement the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and has promoted improved refugee reception, service delivery and self-sufficiency. To that effect, the CRRF was featured in the national refugee-protection plan of 2017 as part of wider international efforts to develop long-term solutions for those subject to protracted stays in refugee camps worldwide. Relatedly, the Ethiopian government introduced a new refugee law in 2019 (Hargrave, 2021). This de jure changes to national policy aimed at facilitating the long-term socio-economic integration of refugees resident in Ethiopia; however, there has been little evidence that these changes have translated into systematic de facto policy (Miller, 2022; Rudolf, 2022).

Since the 1980s, irrespective of these developments, all refugee groups in Ethiopia have been subject to the same de jure laws on reception, freedom of movement and access to services. Therefore, our study focusses on these aspects, with changes to refugees' socio-economic integration yet to be implemented and as such not affecting our research (Nigusie and Carver, 2019; Hagos, 2021

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