

Risk Does Not Deter Migration: The Social Production and Normalization of Risk in Ethiopia-South Africa Mobility

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Abstract

Risk and risk-taking behaviour are central to the study of irregular migration in Sub-Saharan Africa. Ethio-South African migration is characterised by a range of complex vulnerabilities experienced by migrants and their families across departure, transit, and destination stages. Existing literature, alongside reports from media, governmental, and non-governmental organisations, has documented experiences of death, imprisonment, abandonment, robbery, and repatriation along migration routes. While migration control measures are intended to regulate mobility, critical migration scholarship argues that such controls often contribute to the production and displacement of risk rather than its reduction, by pushing migrants into more dangerous and irregular pathways. In line with Harald Bauder's conceptualisation of the social production of migration risk, this study understands migration-related dangers not as inherent to mobility itself, but as outcomes shaped by contemporary border regimes and restrictive migration governance. From this perspective, risks encountered along Ethio-South African migration routes are partly generated through the very systems designed to regulate movement, thereby structuring the conditions under which migrants make decisions and undertake journeys. Similarly, development- and employment-oriented interventions in countries of origin have shown limited effectiveness in discouraging migration among economically constrained populations. Although prior studies have examined migration drivers, facilitation networks, and incident-based accounts of migration, limited attention has been given to understanding why individuals continue to undertake dangerous journeys despite awareness of, or direct exposure to, adverse migration experiences. This study addresses this gap by examining risk-taking behaviours among successful migrants in South Africa, repatriated migrants, repeat migration attempters, and migrant families, including those who have experienced the loss of relatives during migration but con-

tinue to support further mobility within their households. A concurrent longitudinal study design was employed using a multi-sited ethnographic approach. Data were collected through 50 semi-structured interviews, 10 unstructured interviews, eight focus group discussions, and six in-depth key informant interviews. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated where necessary. The data were systematically coded through iterative open and focused coding, enabling the development of analytical categories that informed the thematic interpretation of the findings. Fieldwork was conducted between June 2016 and January 2019 across Ethiopia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. Findings suggest that migration motivations are not static but evolve over time through exposure to conflict, internal displacement, and transnational social networks. While initial mobility is largely shaped by ethnic territoriality, violence, and forced displacement within Ethiopia, these drivers gradually shift as migrant networks and family knowledge of South Africa as a destination become established. Over time, migration aspirations are reconfigured from survival-based and displacement-induced movement into an ambition-oriented pursuit of improved livelihoods abroad. In this process, South Africa emerges as a socially constructed destination of opportunity, and migration decisions increasingly reflect aspiration-driven calculations rather than immediate coercive pressures. Importantly, these evolving risk perceptions and mobility decisions are embedded within structurally constrained migration regimes, where restrictive border practices shape the conditions of uncertainty under which migrants act, as highlighted in Bauder's framework.

Keywords

Irregular Migration, Risk-Taking, Ethiopia, South Africa, Social Anthropology, Migration Studies, Transnational Migration

1. Introduction

Irregular migration from Ethiopia to South Africa via air, land, and sea has become a persistent phenomenon since the 1980s (Bereka & Tufa, 2024). Each year, hundreds of thousands of young people leave Ethiopia with the intention of reaching South Africa, primarily through the Moyale border between Ethiopia and Kenya, continuing across multiple countries in Eastern and Southern Africa until reaching destinations such as Zimbabwe and South Africa, where the journey often culminates (Estifanos, 2017; Horwood, 2009). This migratory process is facilitated by complex networks of intermediaries and infrastructures involving multiple forms of transportation (Ayalew et al., 2018).

Along these routes, migrants experience a range of severe adversities, including death, imprisonment, deportation, and forced return. Those who successfully reach South Africa often face additional challenges such as robbery, discrimination, and xenophobic violence (Estifanos, 2017; Horwood, 2009). In response,

governments along the migration corridor, including Ethiopia and destination countries, together with international organisations, have implemented a combination of migration control policies, border enforcement measures, deportation practices, and development-oriented interventions aimed at reducing irregular migration. In Ethiopia, migration management policies introduced in 2013, alongside development initiatives supported by the African Union, European Union, and International Organization for Migration, have sought to address the economic drivers of migration (Asnake & Zerihun, 2015).

Despite these efforts, irregular migration and associated risk-taking behaviours continue to increase. Although extensive reports document migration-related fatalities, imprisonment, exploitation, and other forms of harm across transit routes (Estifanos, 2017; Kanko et al., 2013; Horwood, 2009; International Organization for Migration, 2021), less is known about how migrants and their families perceive and interpret these risks in shaping migration decisions. A particular gap exists in understanding why individuals continue to undertake repeated migration attempts despite direct or indirect exposure to such adverse experiences.

In contemporary Ethiopia, migration patterns from the Hadiyya and Kambaata communities have become particularly significant in this regard. Historically characterised by internal mobility, these communities have increasingly shifted toward international migration, with a substantial number of young men and women migrating to South Africa through irregular routes (Horwood, 2009; Estifanos & Freeman, 2022). Field observations and prior studies indicate that the Hadiyya and Kambaata constitute some of the most prominent ethnic groups involved in migration to South Africa, compared to other groups in southern Ethiopia. This concentration is linked to established migration networks, cumulative knowledge of the route, and the role of pioneer migrants in shaping community-level aspirations and mobility pathways.

However, despite this growing empirical relevance, the migration experiences of these communities remain under-researched. Existing scholarship on Ethiopian migration to South Africa has paid limited attention to the socio-cultural and ethnic dimensions of migration decision-making, particularly how community-level histories of mobility influence perceptions of risk and aspiration.

Against this background, this study focuses specifically on Hadiyya and Kambaata migrants and their families to examine the underexplored dynamics of risk perception, risk narratives, and risk-taking behaviour. It seeks to address the central question: why do young people continue to engage in irregular migration despite widespread awareness of its dangers and repeated exposure to migration-related adversity within their communities and families?

2. Method

This study examines experiences of vulnerability and risk-taking behaviours among Ethiopian migrants across different stages of the migration trajectory to South Africa, including departure from Ethiopia, transit through intermediary

countries, and arrival in South Africa. Prior to departure, prospective migrants were interviewed regarding their awareness of migration-related dangers, sources of information, and perceived likelihood of encountering adverse conditions. Comparative interviews were also conducted with return migrants who had been deported from transit countries.

The study is informed by critical migration perspectives, particularly Harald Bauder's argument that migration risk is not an inherent attribute of mobility but is socially and politically produced through restrictive border regimes and migration governance. From this perspective, migrant experiences of danger and vulnerability must be understood in relation to structural conditions that shape mobility pathways, rather than solely as outcomes of individual decision-making. This conceptual framing underpins the multi-sited and multi-group research design employed in this study.

The study employed a purposive and criterion-based sampling strategy across multiple sites in Ethiopia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. Participants were selected based on their direct or indirect involvement in irregular migration trajectories to South Africa, including prospective migrants, returnees and deportees, migrants detained in transit countries, individuals who successfully reached South Africa after experiencing migration-related adversities, repeat migration attempters, and migrant families, particularly those who had experienced the loss of relatives during migration or who continued to support the migration of other family members. Participants were recruited through community networks, returnee associations, detention centres, and referrals from migrant families and key informants.

The inclusion of diverse migrant categories reflects the analytical assumption that migration risk is not experienced uniformly but is produced and reproduced across different stages of the migration process and across different positions within migration networks. This aligns with Bauder's emphasis on the relational and structural production of migration risk through border enforcement practices and mobility constraints.

The study further included migrants who successfully reached South Africa despite experiencing imprisonment, abduction, robbery, and the loss of friends or relatives along migration routes. It also included migrants who had been repatriated and had attempted migration two or more times. In addition, migrant families were included, particularly those who had experienced the loss of family members during migration and who subsequently supported or facilitated further migration within the household. To achieve these objectives, a concurrent longitudinal research design was employed using a multi-sited ethnographic approach.

Data were collected through 50 semi-structured interviews, 10 unstructured interviews, eight focus group discussions, and six in-depth key informant interviews. All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented with detailed field notes. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary. The data were

then systematically analysed using thematic analysis. Coding proceeded in iterative stages, beginning with open coding to identify initial concepts, followed by focused coding to refine and cluster categories. These categories were then developed into overarching analytical themes that structured the interpretation of findings presented in the discussion section.

Fieldwork was conducted between June 2016 and January 2019 across Ethiopia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa among repatriated migrants, repeat migration attempters, migrant families, migrants held in detention centres in Malawi and Zimbabwe, and migrants who successfully reached South Africa after experiencing various migration-related risks and incidents.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Addis Ababa University Postgraduate Program. All participants provided informed consent before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Given the involvement of undocumented migrants, detainees, and bereaved families, particular attention was paid to ethical sensitivity.

3. Theoretical Literatures

In migration studies, risk and risk-taking behaviours are understood as emerging from both known and unknown circumstances (Tversky & Kahneman, 1992). Even in “regular” migration contexts, uncertainty remains a defining feature of mobility, as not all risks can be fully anticipated or controlled. This uncertainty is even more pronounced in irregular migration, where migrants face shifting conditions across transit routes, border regimes, and destination contexts. Migration decisions, therefore, are not made under conditions of full information but are embedded within partial knowledge, social interpretation, and situational constraints.

However, migration scholarship increasingly recognizes that uncertainty is not only an individual-level cognitive condition but is also structurally produced. In line with Harald Bauder’s argument on the social production of migration risk, migration-related uncertainties are shaped by restrictive border regimes, immigration controls, and unequal mobility structures that channel migrants into irregular and often dangerous pathways. From this perspective, risk is not simply perceived by migrants but is generated through the governance systems that regulate mobility across space.

Debates in migration studies have long engaged with the question of why individuals undertake risky migration journeys. Some scholars argue that migrants often have limited awareness of the dangers involved, while others emphasize migration ambition, social competition, and structural inequalities between sending and receiving contexts as key drivers of mobility (Bereka & Tufa, 2024). In this sense, risk-taking migration theories seek to explain the cognitive, structural, and situational factors that shape decisions to engage in uncertain mi-

gration trajectories.

Within this study, two complementary theoretical approaches are adopted: Structural Violence Theory and Expected Utility Theory (EUT). Structural Violence Theory, popularized by Johan Galtung, posits that social, political, and economic systems can systematically harm individuals without direct physical violence. In the context of migration, structural violence manifests through poverty, inequality, political instability, and restricted mobility regimes that compel individuals to undertake risky migration journeys. However, this approach has been critiqued for insufficiently addressing migrant agency and the variability of decision-making under similar structural conditions.

Expected Utility Theory, rooted in economics and decision theory, argues that individuals make rational choices by evaluating the expected outcomes of available options and selecting the one that maximizes utility. In migration contexts, this involves weighing perceived benefits such as improved livelihoods against potential risks associated with movement. However, extensive empirical and behavioral research has challenged the assumptions of EUT, particularly its reliance on linear probability weighting and rational calculation.

Behavioural economics and Prospect Theory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1992) further demonstrate that individuals do not always evaluate risks rationally. Phenomena such as the certainty effect, loss aversion, and framing biases indicate that decision-making under uncertainty often deviates from classical rational models. Moreover, migration decisions are rarely made in conditions of complete ignorance. Instead, migrants typically possess partial knowledge of risks and opportunities, shaped by social networks, prior migration experiences, and community narratives.

In addition, the Allais paradox and related empirical findings further highlight inconsistencies in expected utility assumptions, demonstrating that individuals often make choices that diverge from theoretical predictions. These limitations suggest that migration decision-making cannot be fully explained through rational-choice models alone but must be understood as a process shaped by cognitive, emotional, social, and structural factors.

Importantly, this study integrates these behavioral and structural perspectives with Bauder's conceptualization of migration governance, arguing that risk-taking behaviour must be understood at the intersection of individual decision-making and structurally produced constraints on mobility. While Structural Violence Theory highlights the macro-level conditions that generate vulnerability, Bauder's framework specifies how migration governance systems actively produce and redistribute risk through border enforcement and mobility restrictions.

Overall, these theoretical perspectives offer complementary insights into migration decision-making. While Expected Utility Theory and Prospect Theory explain how individuals evaluate risk under uncertainty, Structural Violence Theory and Bauder's approach highlight the systemic conditions that generate that uncertainty in the first place. Together, they provide a more comprehensive frame-

work for understanding why migrants engage in risky migration despite awareness of potential dangers. This integrated approach is particularly useful for analyzing Ethiopian migration to South Africa, where migration decisions are shaped simultaneously by structural constraints, cognitive evaluations, and socially embedded knowledge systems.

4. Literature Review

Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in Africa in terms of per capita income, despite having a population of over 100 million and a rich historical and cultural heritage (New World Wealth, 2015). According to the Central Statistical Agency (CSA, 2010), approximately 83% of the population resides in rural areas and depends on small and declining landholdings with decreasing soil fertility. At the same time, Ethiopia has experienced sustained double-digit economic growth and rapid urbanization over the past decade (MoFED, 2014), alongside a significant demographic shift characterized by a rapidly expanding youth population. This demographic structure has important implications for migration, as many young people seek improved livelihood opportunities abroad, particularly in the Middle East and Gulf states through regular migration channels (Fekadu, 2019). However, a large proportion of young people are unable to access regular migration pathways due to high financial costs, limited legal opportunities, and increasingly restrictive immigration and border control regimes, particularly toward South Africa. As a result, irregular migration has become a prominent alternative despite its high-risk nature (Horwood, 2009). Individuals excluded from formal migration channels often rely on smuggling networks and informal mobility systems (Tufa et al., 2019). Irregular migration includes practices such as visa fraud, overstaying legal entry permits, and crossing borders without authorization (Carling, 2007). These pathways expose migrants to severe risks, including death, detention, deportation, and abandonment.

Recent reports highlight the severity of these risks. For example, VOA (2020) reported the deaths of at least 60 Ethiopian migrants found in a cargo truck in Mozambique, while Agence France-Presse (2022) documented mass graves of Ethiopian migrants in Malawi linked to trafficking networks. Similarly, Anyadike (2023) describes migrants being transported in unsafe and overcrowded conditions, including sealed containers and fuel tankers, often subjected to extortion, starvation, kidnapping, and violence. These cases illustrate that migration routes across Eastern and Southern Africa are characterized by extreme vulnerability and systemic exploitation. In addition to transit risks, migrants face dangers related to transportation methods, nocturnal movement, reliance on smugglers, and unsafe accommodation during transit (Horwood, 2009; Asnake & Zerihun, 2015). Upon arrival in South Africa, migrants often experience xenophobia, robbery, exploitation, and limited access to social protection due to undocumented status (Landau et al., 2005; Horwood, 2009). The criminalization of irregular migration further intensifies vulnerability by increasing exposure to abuse and marginalization.

From a critical migration perspective, these risks are not merely the result of individual decisions or lack of information. Bauder's framework of migration governance argues that migration risks are socially and politically produced through restrictive border regimes and mobility controls. In this sense, irregular migration routes and associated dangers emerge from structural constraints that limit legal pathways, thereby channeling migrants into more dangerous trajectories. Risk, therefore, is not external to migration but is actively produced through governance systems that regulate mobility. [Hernández Carretero \(2008\)](#) raises important questions regarding how migrants perceive and interpret risk in migration decision-making. Similarly, [Starr \(1969\)](#) questions "how safe is safe enough?", highlighting the subjective nature of risk acceptance. [Mengiste \(2017\)](#) argues that high-risk migration should be understood not only as risk-taking behaviour but also as a survival strategy in response to constrained opportunities.

Migration studies further suggest that risk-taking is influenced by a "cosmology of destinations", where migrants rank destinations based on perceived opportunity and desirability ([Belloni, 2019](#)). This symbolic hierarchy sustains migration aspirations despite awareness of risks. Socioeconomic vulnerability also plays a key role, as individuals with fewer resources are more likely to engage in high-risk migration in pursuit of improved livelihoods ([Adams, 2001](#)). Risk-taking is therefore closely linked to structural inequality. Behavioural and economic perspectives further complicate this understanding. While Expected Utility Theory assumes rational decision-making, empirical evidence shows that migration decisions under uncertainty often deviate from rational models. Economically constrained individuals may downplay risk information when evaluating migration opportunities ([Vaughan & Dunton, 2007](#)), while incomplete knowledge of destination conditions increases uncertainty ([Williams & Baláž, 2014](#)). In contexts of constrained alternatives, individuals may still engage in risky migration as a rational response to limited life chances ([Hayenhjelm, 2006](#)).

Risk-taking migration is also shaped by aspiration, hope, and imagined social mobility. [Lupton \(2006\)](#) and [Tulloch & Lupton \(2003\)](#) argue that risk-taking can function as a strategy for self-transformation and social advancement. From this perspective, migration is not only a response to deprivation but also an expression of future-oriented aspiration. [Fargues \(2018\)](#) similarly notes that migration often occurs under conditions where non-migration itself represents a form of risk. Migration decision-making must therefore be understood as an interaction of structural constraints, behavioural cognition, and socio-cultural meaning systems. Bauder's governance perspective complements behavioural theories by showing how border regimes actively structure the conditions under which migration decisions are made.

Studies by [Ayalew et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Bereka & Tufa, \(2024\)](#), along with [Horwood \(2009\)](#), show that brokers play a central role in shaping migration routes through informal arrangements designed to avoid detection by authorities. Many migrants initially enter Kenya legally before continuing through irregular pathways toward

Southern Africa, relying on informal facilitation systems based on trust. Although migrants, families, and facilitators interpret risks differently, they all develop coping strategies such as route diversification, payment negotiation, and informal protection mechanisms. However, broader risk perceptions and decision-making processes remain underexplored, particularly in relation to how structural constraints interact with social networks and aspirations. Overall, Ethiopian migration to South Africa must be understood at the intersection of structural inequality, migration governance, behavioural decision-making, and socio-cultural meaning systems. Despite awareness of danger, migrants continue to engage in irregular migration, suggesting that border controls alone are insufficient. In some cases, stricter controls may unintentionally increase risk by pushing migrants into more dangerous routes (Carling, 2007; Tufa et al., 2019; Hernández Carretero, 2008; Bereka & Tufa, 2024).

4.1. Knowledge of Migration Risks and Perceptions toward Them

A. Sources of Migration Information and Risk Attitudes

Migration risks are experienced, perceived, and interpreted differently by prospective migrants, return migrants, migrant households, and migration facilitators. The findings indicate that awareness of migration-related risks is widespread across all groups; however, such awareness rarely discourages migration. Instead, migration continues to be perceived as a necessary strategy for improving livelihoods and securing future opportunities.

From the perspective of Expected Utility Theory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1992), migration decisions involve assessments of potential gains and losses under conditions of uncertainty. Most prospective migrants demonstrated awareness of dangers such as arrest, deportation, imprisonment, robbery, injury, and death. However, this awareness did not prevent migration intentions, as participants often framed staying at home as equally or more dangerous than migration.

Importantly, this study situates these perceptions within structurally produced conditions of mobility. In line with Harald Bauder's argument on the social production of migration risk, migration-related dangers are not simply external or accidental outcomes, but are generated through restrictive border regimes, immigration controls, and unequal mobility structures. These governance systems channel migrants into irregular pathways, thereby structurally producing the very risks that migrants later perceive and respond to.

While Expected Utility Theory helps explain cost-benefit reasoning, and Prospect Theory explains risk-seeking under deprivation, Bauder's framework clarifies why such high-risk options persist in the first place: legal and safe mobility channels are constrained, making irregular migration a structurally induced necessity rather than a purely individual choice.

Migration information is primarily transmitted through social networks, including relatives, friends, returnees, and migrants in South Africa. These networks simultaneously circulate narratives of danger and success. In Bauder's terms, such

networks operate within structurally constrained migration systems where the absence of safe legal pathways increases dependence on informal and risky migration infrastructures.

Migration facilitators, however, attribute risks to migrants' non-compliance with instructions, whereas migrants link risks to unsafe routes and facilitation practices. These competing narratives demonstrate how responsibility for risk is socially contested within structurally produced migration systems.

B. The Tendency of Downplaying Risks and Risk Normalization

The findings indicate that migration risks are widely normalized among migrants, families, and facilitators. Although participants are aware of dangers, they often minimize them and interpret them as unavoidable aspects of life.

From a Prospect Theory perspective, individuals experiencing persistent deprivation engage in risk-seeking behaviour because their current conditions are already perceived as loss. Migration becomes a comparison between different forms of insecurity rather than between safety and danger.

Bauder's framework further strengthens this interpretation by showing that such normalization is not only psychological but structurally embedded. When migration governance systems systematically restrict safe mobility, risk becomes an ordinary feature of migration pathways rather than an exceptional condition. As a result, migrants adapt to structurally produced insecurity by treating danger as a normal component of mobility.

Structural Violence Theory complements this by showing how long-term exposure to poverty, ethnic marginalization, and insecurity produces conditions in which migration risks are normalized at the community level.

Family expectations also reinforce normalization, as migrants abroad are expected to facilitate further migration. These expectations are embedded within transnational networks that function inside structurally constrained migration regimes, where migration remains one of the few viable strategies for social mobility.

4.2. Self-Blame, Improvisation, and Religiosity towards Migration Risks

The findings reveal that migrants interpret migration risks through self-blame, improvisation, and religiosity, with many attributing adverse outcomes to personal mistakes, thereby reinforcing individual responsibility. From a behavioural perspective, Prospect Theory explains this as a cognitive strategy for preserving future migration aspirations, where failures are reframed as correctable rather than structural.

However, Bauder's framework adds an important corrective: these individual interpretations emerge within structurally produced migration regimes where risk is systematically displaced onto migrants themselves. In other words, when migration systems restrict safe pathways, responsibility for harm is often individualized, even though the underlying risks are structurally generated.

Religious beliefs also play a key role in managing uncertainty by providing emo-

tional and spiritual protection. From a Structural Violence perspective, these practices emerge in contexts where formal protection is absent. Bauder's contribution here is to show that such spiritual coping mechanisms are indirectly shaped by governance systems that fail to provide safe mobility options.

4.3. Risk as Luck and Chance

Migration outcomes are frequently interpreted through notions of luck, chance, and destiny. Success and failure are attributed to fortune rather than structural conditions. While Expected Utility Theory assumes rational probability evaluation, findings show that migrants rely on subjective interpretations of uncertainty.

Bauder's framework is particularly important here: what migrants interpret as "luck" often reflects structurally unequal access to safer routes, better facilitators, or less restrictive border encounters. In this sense, "chance" is not random but shaped by structurally produced inequalities in migration governance.

Structural Violence Theory explains why such interpretations persist, while Prospect Theory explains why hope remains despite repeated exposure to risk.

4.4. Rituals behind the Alleged Risks

The findings show that migrants engage in religious and cultural rituals before departure to manage uncertainty and perceived risk.

From Expected Utility Theory, rituals may be interpreted as attempts to increase perceived probability of success. Prospect Theory explains them as psychological mechanisms for reducing fear under uncertainty.

Structural Violence Theory situates these practices within contexts of deprivation and insecurity.

Importantly, Bauder's framework deepens this explanation by showing that rituals emerge in contexts where migration is structurally risky due to governance regimes that restrict safe mobility. In such contexts, spiritual protection substitutes for institutional protection, reinforcing the idea that migration risk is not only culturally managed but also structurally produced.

Summary of the Article

Migration risks along the Ethiopia-South Africa corridor are experienced, interpreted, and negotiated differently by migrants, prospective migrants, migration facilitators, and migrant households. While awareness of dangers such as death, arrest, detention, deportation, and exploitation is widespread, this awareness rarely functions as a deterrent. Instead, risk is frequently recalibrated through lived socio-economic constraints, where remaining at home is often framed as equally or more precarious. In this context, risk awareness does not translate into risk avoidance; rather, it is absorbed into migration aspirations and, in some cases, normalized through social stigma associated with non-migration.

Migrant households similarly acknowledge the dangers of irregular migration but continue to support or encourage mobility as a livelihood strategy. This reflects not only limited local opportunities but also the extent to which migration

has become embedded within household survival strategies and trans-local expectations. Risk perception in this sense is not individually constructed but socially produced through networks, facilitators, and broader structural conditions that shape what is considered “necessary” mobility.

Migration facilitators often attribute migration-related risks to migrants’ lack of compliance, unrealistic expectations, or misunderstanding of facilitation procedures. Migrants, however, contest these narratives by emphasizing unsafe routes, coercive transport arrangements, and the absence of protection during transit. This divergence reveals a deeper political economy of responsibility within irregular migration systems, where risk is displaced between actors rather than structurally addressed. Across all groups, risk normalization becomes a dominant interpretive framework: migrants may internalize blame for adverse outcomes, while simultaneously reframing risk as an unavoidable condition of mobility under current constraints.

Overall, this normalization of risk reflects the interaction between structural deprivation and constrained mobility regimes that limit safe migration alternatives. As a result, risk-taking is not simply a matter of individual recklessness but a socially embedded response to structurally produced immobility. Despite repeated exposure to violence, deportation, and death along migration routes, migration aspirations remain resilient, sustained by networks, expectations, and institutional gaps. Ultimately, irregular migration between Ethiopia and South Africa persists not because risk is underestimated, but because it is continuously re-defined, redistributed, and absorbed within structurally constrained life chances.

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During the preparation of this work the author(s) used AI in order to correct grammar and spelling. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Author’s Contributions

The author conducted all aspects of the research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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