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# COVID-19 and forced immobility in the Horn of Africa

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This is a working paper and there are points that require further development. Given the timeliness of the theme, it seemed appropriate to bring these ideas to a wider audience to stimulate thinking and discussion at this early stage. I welcome comments and suggestions for its improvement and further refinement.

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not indicate a position or opinion on the part of the European Union or the EU Trust Fund for Africa.

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic overlays a new form of disaster on the already complex array of chronic and periodic crises that beset the people of the Horn of Africa. It has had an immediate effect on human mobility across the world and the region. This paper will explore the nature of pandemic's impact on mobility compared to the impact of other crises.

Most other crises affecting the region, such as conflict, floods or droughts, give rise to displacement and forced migration as people flee to seek safety or get access to resources or services. In response to these movements, states, regional bodies and international organisations often take emergency measures: on the one hand, offering humanitarian aid for those displaced; on the other, seeking to reduce the movements of people, whether by addressing the conflict or other 'root causes' of displacement, or at times even closing borders. The COVID-19 pandemic does not trigger forced movement in the same way. Perhaps those who are sick may move in search of medical help but they do not seek to run away from the disease; it is everywhere and, for most people, flight is not an option. Instead of seeking to respond to crisis-induced movement, which is the humanitarian norm in the region, the pandemic is triggering response to restrict any movement. Instead of forced mobility, we are seeing forced immobility.

This has two immediate implications. First, those who move are regarded with even greater suspicion as potential carriers of the virus. In this sense, the pandemic magnifies the idea of migration and migrants as a threat to human security, reprising the familiar rhetoric from refugee crises. However, there are important differences. In this pandemic, the threat from the movement of people may be more real in relation to health impacts. Second, at the same time the response to the virus that has brought the world juddering to a halt has highlighted the fundamental importance of mobility for people's day to day lives and functioning of the national economy. The paper looks at some of the opportunities and threats that the COVID-19 pandemic may create for the transformation of ideas and policies on migration and development in the Horn of Africa.

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# 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic overlays a new form of disaster on the already complex array of chronic and periodic crises that beset the people of the Horn of Africa. It has had an immediate effect on human mobility across the world and the region. This paper will highlight some of the distinctive characteristics of the COVID-19 crisis that mark it out from the other disasters that continuously beset the Horn of Africa. It will focus on the pandemic's impact on mobility compared to other crises.

Here we are not trying to examine the current response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of this paper is on the nature of the particular crisis engendered by the pandemic and its implication for migration. Unlike many other crises that have beset the region which have generated huge levels of forced migration, here the basic argument is that the pandemic is creating a crisis of immobility.

## 2 Crisis and migration in the Horn of Africa

There is a long association between different crises across the greater Horn of Africa and migration (Allen, 1996; Lindley & Hammond, 2014; Owain & Maslin, 2018; Schmidt, Kimathi, & Owiso, 2019). Over the last half century, the region has seen a constant ebb and flow of conflicts affecting many of countries in the Horn at different times. In the last quarter of the 20th century, the wars for independence in Eritrea and South Sudan, the struggles against the dictatorships in Ethiopia and Uganda and the civil war and collapse of Somalia created huge populations of refugees, many of whom remain in exile to this day. The first quarter of the 21st century has seen widespread conflict and political violence continue, displacing millions of South Sudanese, Somalis, Ethiopians, Sudanese and Eritreans.

These conflicts have been intertwined with the fragile environmental conditions across the region. Half of the IGAD region is classified as arid and semi-arid land (ASAL), which is subject to devastating and recurrent droughts. These greatly limit agricultural productivity rendering millions of people vulnerable to chronic food insecurity. Moreover, the increasing climate variability also means that many areas are prone to extensive flooding that destroys homes, crops and further degrades land. The constant cycle of environmental crises is starkly illustrated by list of disasters offered in the sidebar of UN OCHA's ReliefWeb page, presenting Greater Horn of Africa Climate Risk and Food Security Atlas (see box – and see the atlas for much more discussion of the environmental challenges for the region).<sup>1</sup>

### ReliefWeb – Sidebar list of disasters in the Horn of Africa

[Ethiopia: Drought - 2015-2020](#) / [Ethiopia: Floods - Apr 2016](#) / [Ethiopia: Floods - Oct 2015](#) / [Horn of Africa Crisis: 2011-2012](#) / [Kenya: Drought - 2014-2020](#) / [Kenya: Floods - Apr 2016](#) / [Kenya: Floods - Nov 2015](#) / [Somalia: Drought - 2015-2020](#) / [Somalia: Floods - May 2016](#) / [Somalia: Floods - Oct 2015](#) / [South Sudan: Food Insecurity - 2015-2020](#)

<sup>1</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/greater-horn-africa-climate-risk-and-food-security-atlas>, accessed 14/1/2021.

On the one hand, these environmental crises are exacerbated by the political and economic fragility of the region that increases people's vulnerability to failures in agricultural production and undermines the capacity and sometimes the willingness of local and national government to respond. On the other hand, by causing further impoverishment and magnifying inequalities, these crises also contribute to fomenting tensions feeding into social and political instability and conflict.

This potent and chronic combination of political and environmental crises continuously unfolding at different places across the region has stimulated a massive array of disaster responses. Over the years a complex humanitarian institutional architecture has emerged, drawing together an ever-shifting constellation of actors, from national and local governments, civil society, international organisations, UN bodies and donors. It is not the intention of this paper to analyse these institutions and their disaster responses. Instead, here we draw attention only to some of the basic common characteristics of the crises and their responses and the implications for mobility. In particular, there are three broad qualities that are shared by the various forms of disasters that are most prevalent across the Horn of Africa: their geographical boundedness, their discriminatory nature and their relationship with mobility as a symptom.

## 2.1 Geographically bounded - the disaster zone

At any time, conflict, drought, flood and related disasters are identified with particular locations. Even where an emergency may be ascribed to a whole country or region (see the box above), the immediate crisis is focused on particular geographical sites. Even the Horn of Africa drought of 2010-11, which affected huge numbers of people across the region was focused on southern Ethiopia, south-central Somalia and northern Kenya. However large it may be, an epicentre can be identified. On the one hand, this establishes a theatre for humanitarian operations, where aid is to be delivered – generating a new flow of resources and personnel into the area. On the other hand, as the site of a disaster, it creates huge incentives for departure by those who have the resources to escape to better, safer places.

## 2.2 Discriminatory - target populations

Within the disaster zones, everybody may be affected by the crisis, but it is particular social or political groups who are most exposed to death, injury or other significant harms. In a political crisis or civil war, those associated with the wrong side through political affiliation or ethnicity are likely to be targeted. Drought or floods may first affect the asset poor whose livelihoods are based on primary production, in particular pastoralists and cultivators. Others may be able to continue with their lives without major threats. Threats may also be gendered, with either men or women targeted for assault. The form of discrimination maps out the set of people who are most urgently in need of humanitarian protection and assistance. It starts to establish the target populations for aid. It also shapes the demographic profile of those who (can) flee from the disaster zone, with refugee flows often comprising those of particular ethnic groups, including large numbers of women and children. The neutral position and safety of aid workers is no longer assumed and they have been attacked and killed in some settings. Nonetheless, for the most part, there is still an expectation that

humanitarian actors moving into the disaster area to assist will not be facing the same perils and hardships as those they seek to help.

## 2.3 Mobility as a symptom

It is hard to find the appropriate word or phrase to capture this quality of these disasters. There is no doubt that conflict and environmental disasters are related to mobility. Looking at the long term, population migration changes the environmental load on an area – the intensity of cultivation or grazing – potentially contributing to the build-up of a crisis. As different ethnic groups move between areas, the resultant changes in demographic and political balances have been implicated in many conflicts. Likewise, as already noted, the onset of crisis stimulated migration away from and into the disaster zone. The scale of the movement can mean that the disaster set in motion by war, drought or flood is reframed as a refugee or displacement crisis. Without wanting to deny the huge and often protracted suffering arising from this mass displacement, it is important to recognise that this a consequence of another crisis. The mobility is symptom more than a cause. The problem is not that people move: it is why they move and the conditions in which they move.

These three qualities have contributed to the development of the particular humanitarian architecture and institutions that operate across the Horn of Africa. There may be many others that can be elaborated to build up a more nuanced picture. This first attempt may be open to the charge of caricature. However, when we turn to consider the COVID-19, we can see how this analysis highlights important points of divergence.

Before looking at the current COVID-19 crisis, it is important to note that there are other acute crises that affect the Horn of Africa that fall outside the ambit of the conflict and environmental disasters raised so far. In particular, the region has been sharply affected by two health crises – the HIV/AIDS pandemic and periodic outbreaks of Ebola. While the former has spread across every part of the region and to every part of the population, its long incubation period and slow, but nonetheless devastating, effect on health puts it into a different realm of crisis response, operating over a much longer time frame. Ebola, with its rapid and relatively easy transmission and lethal impact has generated much more immediate public health responses to restrict its spread. These have successfully confined the outbreaks of Ebola to limited areas of South Sudan and Uganda. Many commentators have noted that lessons learned and systems put in place in preparation for Ebola have been played an important role in shaping public health responses to COVID-19 (Lumu, 2020).

## 3 The COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis

The spread of COVID-19 is clearly a global disaster that is now being experienced in the Horn of Africa. While it has peaked in various changing geographical hotspots, what has taken the world by storm is its rapid and easy transmissions to all parts of globe. While HIV/AIDS spread everywhere, its rate of transmission is much slower. Unlike the other crises, there is no escape from COVID-19 through flight.

Certain population groups are particularly vulnerable to the disease, most notably the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions. It also exhibits a gender bias with men more likely than women to become serious ill when they catch the virus.<sup>2</sup> The scientific research into the epidemiology of the disease is making rapid advances and there is a growing understanding of who is most at risk. However, there is a clear risk to all adults, young and old, who face a weighted lottery. The hospitals filling up across many countries in the world and the stories of people's lives blighted by the long-lasting impacts of infection are commonplace.

There was a widespread expectation that the virus would spread even more rapidly in the poorer regions of the world, where the health systems are much weaker. However, in Africa, infection and mortality rates have not accelerated in line with the dire predictions of the early weeks of the pandemic. Across the continent as a whole they have remained much lower than many of the wealthier regions of the world. Some of this is likely to be due to under-reporting as there is little doubt that infection rates and deaths have been significant.<sup>3</sup> The other reasons for what some refer to as the 'Africa paradox' is the subject of much research and debate (Ghosh, Bernstein, & Mersha, 2020; Lawal, 2021; The Lancet, 2020). The explanations put forward include the relative youth of the populations across much of the continent (especially the Horn), the warmer climates that inhibit the spread of the virus, and the rapid public health responses by many countries, especially those that had experienced outbreaks of Ebola in recent years.

While at the early stages of the pandemic there was great concern about the virus being transmitted through contact with different surfaces, the principal vector is people. The virus is spread as people come into close proximity with each other: talking, laughing, coughing, sneezing, touching each other and eating together (The Lancet Respiratory Medicine, 2020). As a result, attempts to limit the spread of the disease have focused on minimising the level of physical contact between people. These include the widespread introduction of rules to encourage or require social distancing, hand hygiene, and requirements to wear face masks in public spaces. Those who are suspected to have the disease are isolated and those who may have had contact with them are required to go into quarantine.

Alongside these measures focused on individual actions, many countries have introduced wider restrictions to further reduce people's incentives and ability to move about and mix with each other. Table 1, drawn from a study undertaken by the REF, gives a summary of the different steps being taken by IGAD countries in mid-2020. As the table shows, many countries in the region had already in the first few months of the pandemic put in place some form of lockdown of various levels of severity and duration. The table is now outdated, but it serves to illustrate the broad menu available to states from which they can design their policy to combat the spread of the disease. This includes

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-020-19741-6>. Moreover, in Europe, there are higher infection and mortality rates among some minority ethnic groups; outside South Africa, this effect is not evident across Africa.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/15/lack-of-covid-data-may-leave-african-countries-behind-in-vaccine-rush>



the following options, each of which has been adopted by one or more countries in the region:

- Closure of land borders
- Restricting international air travel – from full suspension to restricting travel from particular destinations
- New international travel conditions – requirements to produce negative COVID-19 test result or go into quarantine on arrival
- Internal travel restrictions – controlling movement between provinces
- Imposing capacity restrictions on public transport – to ensure social distancing can be maintained
- Closing entertainment and hospitality venues – cafes, bars, restaurants, cinemas
- Closing all non-essential businesses – leaving open only a restricted set, such as food stores and pharmacies.
- Closing places of worship
- Closing schools and colleges
- Limits on association – restricting the size of group gatherings
- Curfews – confining people to their houses

These measures make clear the importance of the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and mobility. Control and reduction of mobility at all levels – from international travel to leaving one’s house – lies at the heart of the disaster response. How far these are appropriate or effective responses are questions for ongoing research that lie beyond the scope of this paper. Already, many have noted that the approach to lockdowns adopted in the wealthier cities of the world does not readily translate to many poor urban areas where people are dependent on daily income from the informal economy and there is no welfare safety net to help enable them to suspend their economic life (Kassa & Grace, 2020).

Turning back to the three common characteristics of the political and environmental crises of recent decades in the Horn of Africa, we can see the global pandemic looks very different. It is pervasive throughout the region – and beyond - and is not confined within any given disaster zone (unlike the outbreaks of Ebola that have sporadically flared up in Uganda and South Sudan). It is also spread through all sectors of the population. While wealthy elites may buy some protection with their large houses and access to resources that enable them to lockdown in relative comfort, they are still catching and dying from the disease. COVID-19 stalks the corridors of power across the world.<sup>4</sup> This picture may change as the vaccines become available throughout the world, but in these early days, the pandemic is relatively non-discriminatory compared to other disasters. Nobody is immune. Finally, unlike other disasters, mobility is not just a symptom, it plays a central role in enabling the crisis to spread. Hence why responses are so focused on reducing mobility at every level.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/18/coronavirus-corridors-power-which-world-leaders-have-covid-19/>  
Accessed 14/01/21

**Table 1: Snapshot of COVID-19 measures in the Horn of Africa (as of 8 June 2020)**

	Measures in place
Djibouti	Lockdown including closure of schools, places of worship and public transport announced on 23 March. Lockdown measures have been incrementally lifted since 17 May (UN Djibouti 2020b)
Eritrea	Stay at home guideline effective 2 April for 21 days (since extended), including closure of schools and non-essential businesses, movement between provinces restricted (Eritrea Ministry of Information 2020)
Ethiopia	No lockdown, but restrictions on group gatherings, inter-regional movement, schools closed and elections postponed, state of emergency declared, mandatory facemask, compulsory 14-day quarantine for those coming from abroad, Ethiopian Airlines continuing some flights (Pilling 2020).
Kenya	Air travel suspended, public gatherings banned, nationwide curfew from 9pm to 4am, schools to remain closed until September, mandatory facemasks. On 16 May borders closed with Somalia and Kenya, though informal border crossings continue. Movement into and out of Nairobi, Mombasa and Mandera restricted, but previous restrictions within Eastleigh, Old Town in Mombasa and Kwale and Kilifi lifted in 6 June announcement (Mbewa 2020; BBC 2020a; Government of Kenya 2020)
Somalia/ Somaliland	National preparedness plan launched by the Federal Government of Somalia in March (Federal Government of Somalia 2020), National Committee for Preparedness and Prevention of COVID-19 convened in Somaliland, as well as the Armed Forces Coordination Committee. International flights suspended from 18 March 2020 (Ali 2020) apart from Ethiopian Airlines to Hargeisa, and domestic flights also suspended, compulsory 14-day self-isolation for those arriving from high-risk countries prior to suspension of flights. Mogadishu placed under curfew on 15 April between 8pm and 5am, learning institutions closed, qat import, trade and consumption banned
South Sudan	Initial restrictions included the suspension of international flights, closure of land borders, restrictions on internal movement on local taxis and <i>boda bodas</i> (motorcycle taxis), closure of non-essential shops, and a night time curfew, however most of the restrictions were not implemented. In a statement on 7 May, President Salva Kir relaxed most of the restrictions (curfew time shortened, restaurants and bars to re-open, <i>boda boda</i> transport to resume, internal travels to resume) (Wudu and Aurelio 2020)
Sudan	No international or domestic flights (except for humanitarian and cargo planes), national curfew, travel between Khartoum and other states banned (Gallopini 2020). Lockdown in Khartoum State began on 18 April and has been extended to 18 June (Erdem 2020). States with high rates of infection have increased curfew hours and closed borders with other regions. Measures not strongly enforced (Abdelaziz 2020)
Uganda	Lockdown since 31 March, with educational institutions closed, mass gatherings and public and private transportation suspended. On 2 June, President Yoweri Museveni announced updates to restrictions: public transport operators to resume at half capacity (motorcycle taxis still cannot carry passengers), shopping malls to reopen if able to observe social distancing, government distribution of face masks to begin this month and those without should stay at home. Dusk-to-dawn curfew extended for 3 weeks, and churches, mosques, bars, nightclubs and gyms to remain closed for 21 days (BBC 2020b)

Source: adapted from (REF, 2020)

## 4 The crisis of immobility

Wars and famines are associated with the mass forced movement of people as refugees or displaced persons. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic promoting the mass forced immobility of people across the Horn of Africa – and the rest of the world. This has thrown up many new phenomena as the skies empty of aircraft, once busy highways fall silent, and city streets are deserted. There is already a growing body of research into the implications for carbon emissions, pollution levels, wildlife reclaiming urban spaces, not to mention the transformation to virtual working for millions of people around the world. This stands alongside research into the implications of the pandemic for the longstanding debates in social sciences around sustainable development – such as inequality, employment, socio-economic transformation and so forth. In recent years, migration and mobility has become a core concern in development debates, not least within the Horn of Africa.

In this final section, I look at two key issues that the pandemic forces to the forefront of our analysis. Here I draw on my own background as a researcher working on the relationship between development and migration within Africa (Bakewell, 2008, 2020) and recent work undertaken with colleagues from the Research and Evidence Facility (REF) on migration in the Horn of Africa, funded by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa.<sup>5</sup>

Forced migration and displacement have been common across every region of Africa at different times over the last fifty years. However, it is East Africa and the Horn that have most consistently produced the largest numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons. This chronic experience of displacement has generated a huge volume of analysis, policy and scholarship – not to mention countless initiatives to address the challenges of displacement and find solutions across the region. In recent years this focus on displacement has been overlaid with a concern about migration out of the region, in particular the growth of irregular migration towards the Gulf, Europe and South Africa. The research on refugees and internally displaced persons is now interleaved with analysis of smuggling and trafficking. From my personal experience, almost any discussion on migration in the region, whether with donors, government officials, NGOs or academics, will rapidly slip into a focus on forced migration. Where we start talking about migrants, we nearly always end up talking of refugees and displacement. Given the regional context this should not be surprising as it reflects different stakeholders' priorities for action. However, I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic may highlight the importance of reframing some of these discussions.

First, as the response to the pandemic requires the extreme control of mobility, it feeds into the prevalent discourse of migration and migrants as threat. Those who move in the pandemic are suspect, liable to harbour infection and this is likely to exacerbate xenophobia and the marginalisation of migrants, whether refugees, internally displaced or labour migrants (REF, 2020). This echoes the common responses of communities to the strangers in their midst. It was evident in REF research into irregular migration through Somalia and Djibouti, where Ethiopian migrants looking to cross to Yemen were identified with poor sanitation and disease (Sturridge, Bakewell, &

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<sup>5</sup> <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/ref-hornresearch/>

Hammond, 2017). This renewed perception of migration as a threat raises huge concerns about the implications for the lives of millions of migrants across the region (REF, 2020).

It also reinforces the association between migration and insecurity that has reverberated around debates about refugees and irregular migration in the Horn. The pandemic has enabled states to take extreme measures to close down borders, confine populations and institute extensive surveillance to try to reduce the spread of the virus. In other times, such repressive actions would likely have generated a chorus of condemnation from the population and the international community. It is very possible that some of these policies will linger well beyond the pandemic: in particular, those that seem to address the growing focus on the management of migration.

However, at the same time as amplifying the desire and possibilities for further restrictions on migration, the response to the pandemic has also drawn new attention to the fundamental importance of mobility at all levels for the functioning of national economies and people's livelihoods. Stopping still is not an option. Instead, there is a crisis of immobility as people's movements for work, trade, education and leisure are severely restricted.

Even in this region, where crisis-driven migration dominates the agenda of scholarship and policy, there are these everyday patterns of mobility that underpin people's livelihood and wider processes of development and change (Bakewell & Bonfiglio, 2013). As noted above discussions about migration in the region rapidly pivot to displacement. The forced immobility of the pandemic could act as a stimulus to rethink these directions. If we do not understand enough about the role of rural-urban migration, formal and informal labour migration, education and migration, and informal cross-border trading, it is hard to understand what happens when it is disrupted. These are some of the bread-and-butter issues for migration research in other regions of Africa and the world but they are too little explored in the Horn of Africa.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has qualities rather unlike the persistent political and environmental crises in the Horn of Africa. It is not geographically focused in a crisis zone but found everywhere. It is less discriminate leaving nobody safe from the disease. Whereas the other crises result in massive displacement of populations, the virus is spread via people's movement so the response is to enforce immobility to stop the spread. It is therefore causing a crisis of immobility. On the one hand, this reinforces the association between migration and security and states' desire to strengthen migration control. On the other hand, it reveals the fundamental importance of mobility at all levels for the functioning of society. This is particular important in a region where there is so much focus on forced migration and insufficient understanding of the wider role of mobility in underpinning people's everyday lives and livelihoods and generating development.

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