

POLICY BRIEF

Migration and Conservation in the Bale Mountains Ecosystem

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The Bale Mountains ecosystem is located in southeast Ethiopia. It is made up of Bale Mountains National Park (BMNP), a globally important centre of endemism, in the north, and Harenna Forest, the largest remaining stand of moist tropical forest in Ethiopia, in the south. Harenna Forest has experienced a major influx of migrants since the 1990s, largely driven by local political factors relating to the area's administrative subdivisions. This threatens the forest's critical conservation values and ecosystem services.

In order to better understand what is driving this migration, how it is impacting the ecosystem, and how these impacts can be addressed, the project team conducted desk and field-based research on two sections of the forest that have been affected by very different migration scenarios: the *woredas* (or districts) of Harenna Buluk and Delo Mena. Harenna Buluk is located in the southwest portion of the forest, and has experienced large-scale migration over the past 20 years. By contrast, Delo Mena, which is in the southeast of the forest, has seen minimal levels of migration.

The influx of migrants into Harenna Buluk has been driven by a combination of pull factors relating to local politics and the perceived availability of land, and push factors relating to limited economic opportunities and access to suitable agricultural land in the migrants' areas of origin. The most significant pull factor has been the desire of political elites to rapidly increase the district's population by actively promoting migration. Delo Mena has a similar terrain and climate to Harenna Buluk, but lacks the same political forces; migration to the area has been limited.

Livelihoods in the region have traditionally revolved around pastoralism. However the migrant population in Harenna Buluk has introduced new and more profit-oriented livelihoods centred on crop farming, and local residents have rapidly adopted the farming methods of their migrant

neighbours. Cultural similarities between the local and migrant communities have facilitated the rapid adoption of new, economically advantageous livelihoods introduced by the migrants. By contrast, Delo Mena residents have had less contact with migrants and have to a greater extent retained their traditional livelihoods. That said, across both case study areas local residents are increasingly engaging in the management and harvesting of forest coffee, which has become increasingly profitable as the value of Harenna Forest coffee increases and market access improves.

Across both sites, livelihood diversification and the intensification of previously sustainable, traditional forest resource management systems are having negative repercussions on the forest, including deforestation, forest degradation, and habitat loss and fragmentation. Satellite images and anecdotal observations from stakeholders indicate that forest cover has decreased in both *woredas*, while agricultural land continues to expand. The ultimate impact at both sites is biodiversity loss. These negative changes are happening regardless of migration pressures, but they are happening at a faster rate in Harenna Buluk. In a context of rapid national transformation and escalating internal population pressures, migration is accelerating and intensifying existing land conversion processes, and amplifying biodiversity impacts.

A number of key themes emerge in terms of the involvement of migrants and non-migrants in forest-dependent livelihoods. Non-migrants in Harenna Buluk have increasingly adopted migrant livelihoods, while migrants themselves are minimally involved in pastoralist livelihoods. Similarly, migrants have only a limited involvement in forest coffee production. With regards to farmland, plots are generally the same across the two groups, though migrants use land more efficiently than local residents. Migrants have introduced new crops, particularly *khat*, which local residents have begun to cultivate.

There are solutions to the problems presented by migration into the area. First, authorities can try to address migration into Hareenna Buluk. This would require regulating the informal land market and introducing new regulations to curb the expansion of unsustainable settlements and the land conversion processes that are threatening the forest's key conservation values. In Ethiopia, local administrations (*kebeles*) have the right to pass bylaws; it would be possible to formally regulate and restrict settlement expansion in critical areas through this mechanism, given political will. But for this strategy to be effective, existing financial incentives that motivate many *kebele* leaders to allow migrants to informally settle in the area in large numbers (i.e., the informal "land use tax") should also be revised.

There is also a need to strengthen the protection of Hareenna Forest. Many of the ecosystem's species—including the Bale monkey, the Africa wild dog, the forest's lions, and the grass frog—could be made flagship conservation species. As umbrella species, the conservation of their habitat in the Hareenna Forest would ensure the protection of numerous other key plant and animal species. This will require significant additional funding, not just to implement potential habitat and species-specific management strategies, but also to achieve the supporting objectives of the ecosystem's general management plan.

At the local, state and national levels, Hareenna Forest conservation programs can also be promoted through the lens of water conservation. The forest's key role in local and regional water supply and security is threatened by deforestation and forest degradation; by extension, Hareenna Forest plays a key role in local economic development and food security, particularly in a context of climate change. Conservationists can use this message to strengthen the case for preservation among local communities and authorities, to raise funds, and to press for the increased enforcement of local laws governing resource access and use.

Conservationists should also focus on rebuilding those conflictual relationships that are blocking constructive and sustainable forest resource management and use. This will

require identifying shared interests and needs, as well as neutral mediators who can bring the parties together and establish dialogue between them. The role of mediator should of course be approached with caution; there is always the risk that an attempt to resolve tensions between opposing groups could backfire and lead to further broken connections between other stakeholders.

It is essential to further enhance and tighten recently introduced forest management bylaws to improve the long-term sustainability of local forest-dependent livelihoods. While the current participatory forest management regulations in Hareenna Buluk and Delo Mena include penalties for infractions, these penalties consist of minor fines that are largely symbolic and are unlikely to act as effective deterrents in their current form. Further measures are also needed to build enforcement capacities and to clarify boundaries between *kebeles*.

Finally, the provision of sustainable, viable livelihoods to forest-adjacent communities is of prime concern, both with regards to community well-being and to the well-being of the forest. These livelihood options will have to be developed in concert with local communities, to ensure that they meet their needs and interest, and they must be provided in a conflict-sensitive way to ensure that they are not inequitably distributed to just a few well-connected individuals or communities. Benefits should also extend only to those already in the area; organizers would have to avoid a situation in which the alternative livelihoods simply attract more migrants to the region in search of jobs. Tourism may be one viable option that both provides both jobs to locals and migrants and increases awareness among both communities as to the importance of forest conservation.

The decline of Hareenna Forest must be reversed, not only for the sake of its flora and fauna, but also for the communities that rely on it for water, food and livelihoods. For this to happen, policy-makers and practitioners must recognize the role that migration has played in its decline, and work with local and migrants communities to minimize its negative impacts and—where possible—enhance its positive contributions.

IISD's Migration and Conservation in the Great Lakes Region project examines the emerging impacts of human migration on the critical ecosystems of the Great Lakes region of Africa. The overall goal of the project is to improve the protection of biodiversity and critical ecosystems in areas experiencing significant pressures resulting from human migration. The project aims to achieve this by developing practical tools and interventions for conservation, development, and humanitarian actors working in the region to understand and respond to specific migration threats. The project is made possible by the generous support of the MacArthur Foundation.

