

Project Abstract:

Populations that are affected by both environmental changes and conflicts are confronted with a double risk to their respective livelihoods. Such twofold exposure not only affects local day-to-day practices, but also (re)configures prevalent patterns of (im)mobility. Globally, there are manifold examples where increasingly challenging environmental conditions and settings of conflict appear in close geographical proximity, which holds true for the case of southern Ethiopia as well. Even though such circumstances ostensibly provide ample motivation for people to leave or even contribute to forcibly uproot people from their homes, emerging patterns of (im)mobility are not as straightforward as it might seem. The large majority of people in areas affected by both environmental change and conflict actually remain in place and are immobile. Others engage in mobilities, but these are often across small distances, over short periods of time, and in a circular motion. Upon zooming out, these mobilities still find their expression in a highly localized arena, illustrating the inherently relative character of (im)mobility and showing the relevance of “micro-mobilities” as a means of adaptation under severe livelihood risks. Further compounding the relative character of (im)mobility and the importance of scale is the fact that people who engage in mobile strategies often experience long periods of stillness and waiting along the way or in their respective destinations, whilst others consciously align their mobilities with the clear intention to return to the place called “home”. One factor that can contribute to better understand these characteristics of human (im)mobility under conditions of high livelihood risk is place attachment. People’s affectionate relationships to place and their inherent feelings of belonging have often been overlooked in more classical approaches towards migration that so far fail to answer the key question why people consciously decide to stay in or return to areas of environmental or conflict risk. Understanding the role of place attachment for human (im)mobilities can contribute to assist people in areas of high risk and can inform policies that are tailored to local populations’ (im)mobility preferences. This project implements a qualitative mixed-methods design over a six-month period of empirical fieldwork in two rural southern Ethiopian settings that are both affected by increasing environmental challenges and the implications of either recent or ongoing conflicts. Looking at two inherently different social groups, the agrarian Konso and the semi-pastoralist Hamar, this study aims to (re)affirm the seminal role of place attachment for human (im)mobilities across geographical and socio-cultural contexts and thereby also seeks to advance a more relational understanding of human (im)mobility as such.