

Fishing for ourselves

- Interview

By Eskedar Kifle -
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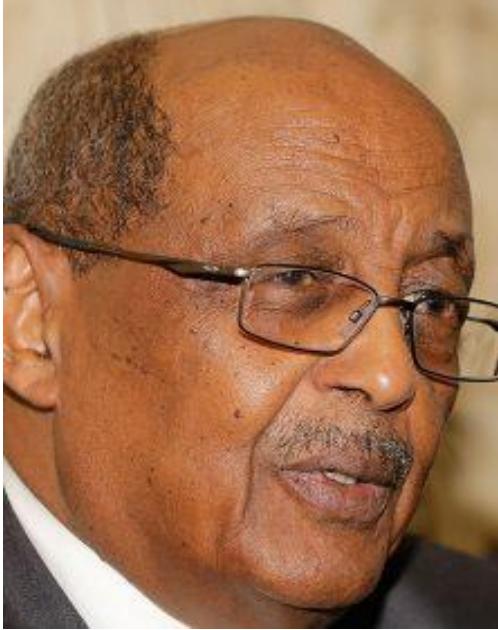
Capital

Ali Issa Abdi (Dr.), Managing Director of the Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute (HESPI)

The Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute (HESPI) held a half day policy forum on "Illicit Migration from the IGAD Region and its Implications" on Friday, March 10, 2017. The Forum tried to address the root causes of migration in the source and destination countries. It also examined the consequences and challenges migrants face, both during the process and at arrival in destination countries. Capital's Eskedar Kifle caught up with HESPI's Managing Director Dr. Ali Issa Abdi to talk about the issue of illicit migration as well as many governments' focus on creating opportunities for the young in Africa. Capital: Tell us a bit about what HESPI does.

Ali Issa Abdi: It is one of the very few regional Think Tanks in the Horn of Africa. Most of the Think Tanks you hear about are country specific; Kenyan, Ethiopian, Djiboutian and so on. In the case of HESPI nature of the work is on a region wide basis and also the focus of the Institute is really on economic and social policy and development. There are several publications we put out on issues such as fiscal issues, monetary issues and productive sector issues like agriculture or industry. We look at the question how to have sustainable growth, which is inclusive, that generates jobs and which hopefully leads to prosperity.

I think the basic facts are to build the right policies; you have to have the right solutions and institutions. So that is the focus on HESPI and also what is unique about it is that we are not related to any government, it is an autonomous independent Think Tank , we don't get involved in political discourse. Occasionally we tackle issues of security and conflict because it does have impact on economic development. We do a bit of institution building; we are not the experts but we do bring the experts together.



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Capital: Many say that Think Tanks in Africa are weak and have not been able to influence policy in a significant way. What is your take on that?

Abdi: I beg to differ. We are a very new Think Thank, about 10 years old. There are other Think Tanks that have been working for a much longer time. For instance the Ethiopian Development Research Institute (EDRI), the Kenyan Institute of Public Policy and Administration and so on, they have been around for 25, 30 years and they have had a considerable influence on government policies.

I think it would be unfair to say that that Think Thanks have not had an impact, we may not have had the kind of impact that we would have liked to have, we can't be compared with institutions in the West for example because they have a lot of resources and support. Most of us are struggling with sustainability but we are doing so much with so little and if we get the support of the region, the private sector and some foundations, we could be a bit more impactful. If we don't have the resources, it is not easy to expand your reach or impact. But we are not complaining, we have started well

Capital: What would you say are some of the challenges that the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) region is facing currently?

Abdi: The challenge is pretty much associated with migration. For example there is unemployment; people between 15 to 35 account for one third of the population and around 60 percent of the labor force, this is likely to be the most explosive problem for the region if something is not done.

Unless we find quality jobs with sufficient remuneration, it is going to have an impact on migration, security and even the sustainability of the transformation process. So if you were to say what is currently a serious issue for a government to worry about, it is to create the right type of jobs and transform the economy to create demand for the services of these young people. Otherwise we are going to be increasing the numbers creating more problems and leading to crisis.

We don't want to end up with the kind of issues that come from unemployment. The kind of income gap that exists elsewhere is also emerging here; you have a sufficiently broad middle class and then you have a massive number of unemployed young people that could be explosive.

Capital: Do governments understand the importance of the issue and are they focusing on creating jobs for their young population?

Abdi: I think, at least in this country, there is a bit of focus on generating the right type of skills, improving education access as well as broadening the industrial base in the country. Once you get the right skills and there is a demand for those skills and services.

As a continent, we have a long way to go. When will we wake up to the severity of the problem is the question. Solutions are not easy to find; it is easy for me as a researcher to recommend solutions, but practicality and getting the right skills is something that is difficult, you need to have the right investment in place. So now the focus may not be there, but it should be.

Capital: Clearly unemployment is one of the reasons young people are migrating. But besides that, what do you think is driving this influx of migration?

Abdi: Globalization; access to information or misinformation. We live in a global village, we have Facebook, and one might know x number of people who have now settled in America or Europe, that kind of limited information or what I call misinformation is a driving influence.

I think, proper education, information is important. We need to educate our young not to just see the fancy lights of Europe, life there is not as easy as people think. It is easier with legal migration where you are assured protection.

Once you subject yourself to illegal migration, you are in the hands of people who don't have respect for human rights, human life and if you don't parish in the transition, you will struggle at the destination.

So, certainly generating livelihoods, protecting human rights are also important. Most people who migrate within the region for example are not economic migrants; they are simply migrants for security reasons; either political security or due to climate impact on their livelihoods. We have to know what is driving the mass of people who are moving not necessarily to Europe but within the region itself.

Capital: Speaking about migration within the region and creating employment opportunities, what about opening up African countries' borders so that people can move freely to find opportunities within the continent, wouldn't that have a positive effect on illicit migration?

Abdi: You are touching on a critical issue for this continent and the sub regions of this continent to address the whole mobility of labor force. We have done absolutely poorly in this, there are some sub regions in for example in West Africa that are getting to have a common passport, free movement of people and so on.

The IGAD sub region is unfortunately lagging behind in this. It is not only unskilled people moving but also those with high skills that are leaving Africa in terms of brain drain and end up in Europe or the US. In my view it would be much better if they had access to movement within the region. I think you are touching on an issue that maybe we may well address in one of our own policy forums in the near time.

Capital: African governments have the duty of creating opportunities for their population to curb illicit migration. What would you say should be the role of developed countries to help in that regard?

Abdi: It is a global issue that has to be addressed through cooperation of the concerned countries and governments. One of the things I am a product of is Western education opportunities. The most impactful thing America did for Africa is opening its universities to African students.

One of the reasons China and India for instance have made such scientific gains is because hundreds of thousands of their elites studied in European Universities. So what can developing countries do for Africa? Open their institutions of higher learning, open legal routes of migration so people can get the experience in science and engineering, instead of saying I'm going to feed you in your own place. They should do something, as the saying goes, help us learn "to fish for ourselves".