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Agricultural produce and artisanal goods in the translocal economy of migrant families

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Abstract

Ethiopia's agricultural heartlands and its rapidly growing cities are connected by more than roads. Between them flows a steady current of teff, berbere spice, woven baskets, hand-forged tools, and dozens of other goods that sustain both the material and cultural lives of migrant families. This research examined the role of agricultural produce and artisanal goods in the translocal economy linking rural communities in the Amhara and Oromia regions with Addis Ababa. A mixed-methods design combined a structured survey (n = 402) of migrant households in four Addis Ababa sub-cities with 42 semi-structured interviews conducted in both urban and rural settings between March 2023 and January 2024. A Translocal Economy Index (TEI) was developed and validated for this research, capturing six dimensions: agricultural produce flow, artisanal goods flow, cash remittances, labour exchange, ceremonial contributions, and knowledge transfer. Results showed that agricultural produce dominated origin-to-city transfers, peaking during the Bega dry season (October-January) when post-harvest surpluses were highest. Artisanal goods woven textiles, pottery, metalwork followed a different seasonal pattern, peaking during Kiremt (the rainy season, June-September) when agricultural work slowed and craft production intensified. A before-and-after comparison of 54 households affected by a major road disruption on the Addis-Bahir Dar corridor in 2023 revealed that agricultural produce transfers dropped by 47.2% during the disruption period, while artisanal goods lighter, more portable, and less perishable declined by only 18.6%. Migration duration shaped the translocal economy profile: recent migrants relied heavily on agricultural produce, while long-term settlers shifted toward artisanal goods, cash, and ceremonial contributions. The research concludes that agricultural and artisanal goods serve complementary functions in translocal economies, with agriculture providing caloric and economic sustenance and artisanal goods carrying cultural identity and social prestige.

Keywords: Agricultural produce, artisanal goods, translocal economy, migrant families, Ethiopia, seasonal transfers, rural-urban linkages, material flows, Translocal Economy Index, livelihood diversification.

Introduction

In a single week in Addis Ababa's Mercato market, a sack of teff from Gojjam province and a hand-woven shemma cloth from Wollo province may sit side by side on the same bus cargo hold, destined for the same migrant family. Yet in academic analysis, these two items inhabit different worlds: the teff belongs to agricultural economics, the shemma to material culture studies. This disciplinary separation obscures a reality that migrant families experience as unified: agricultural produce and artisanal goods travel the same channels, serve the same relational purposes, and together constitute the material infrastructure of translocal life ^[1]. Ethiopia's internal migration landscape has transformed rapidly since the early 2000s. Addis Ababa's population surpassed 5 million in 2022, drawing workers from every regional state but especially from the Amhara and Oromia highlands ^[2]. These migrants maintain deep connections to their rural origins, visiting regularly and, crucially, exchanging goods in both directions along major

transport corridors ^[3]. The Addis-Bahir Dar highway, the Addis-Jimma road, and the newly expanded Addis-Adama expressway function not just as commuting arteries but as supply chains for a parallel economy of non-market transfers. Agricultural produce teff, wheat, barley, legumes, oilseeds, honey, and spices forms the caloric backbone of these transfers. For many urban migrants, receiving grain and spices from the village is not just a cultural preference but an economic necessity: Addis Ababa's food prices have risen sharply, and home-sourced produce can reduce household food expenditure by an estimated 15-25% ^[4]. Artisanal goods occupy a different niche. Woven textiles, basketry, pottery, and hand-forged iron tools carry cultural prestige and serve as identity markers, connecting urban migrants to craft traditions associated with specific regions or ethnic groups ^[5]. Despite their importance, agricultural and artisanal transfers have been analysed in separate literatures. Agricultural economists track marketed surplus and value chains ^[6]; anthropologists examine craft traditions

and material culture ^[7]. Neither discipline has systematically examined how these two categories function together within a single translocal economy. Nor has the seasonal dimension received adequate attention: Ethiopia’s three-season agricultural calendar (Belg, Kiremt, Bega) imposes a rhythm on material transfers that cash remittances, sent at any time, do not share.

This research bridges these gaps through three questions: (1) how do the volumes and compositions of agricultural and artisanal goods transfers vary by season and by flow direction? (2) How does migration duration shape the relative importance of different translocal economy dimensions? (3) How vulnerable are different transfer types to transport disruptions, and what does this vulnerability reveal about the logistical architecture of the translocal economy? A purpose-built measurement tool the Translocal Economy Index (TEI) was developed and validated as part of this research to capture the multi-dimensional nature of translocal material flows.

Instrument development and validation

The Translocal Economy Index (TEI) was developed in three stages. First, a literature review and 12 expert consultations identified six core dimensions of translocal economic activity: agricultural produce flow, artisanal goods flow, cash remittances, labour exchange, ceremonial contributions, and knowledge transfer. Second, a 30-item pilot instrument was administered to 48 migrants in Addis Ababa’s Bole and Yeka sub-cities. Exploratory factor analysis confirmed the six-factor structure, and items with factor loadings below 0.45 were removed, yielding a 24-item final instrument.

Internal consistency was strong across all subscales (Cronbach’s α ranging from 0.78 to 0.89). Test-retest reliability was assessed with a four-week interval on a subsample of 36 respondents (intraclass correlation coefficient = 0.83). Convergent validity was supported by significant positive correlations between the TEI total score and an established remittance behaviour scale ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$). Discriminant validity was demonstrated by non-significant correlations with a social desirability measure ($r = 0.09$, $p = 0.41$). The TEI thus provides a reliable and valid tool for measuring the breadth of translocal economic engagement beyond cash remittances alone.

Material and Methods

Results

Table 1: Typology of translocal economy goods: agricultural produce versus artisanal goods across key dimensions

Dimension	Agri: Direction	Agri: Peak	Artis: Direction	Artis: Peak	Resilience
Primary flow	Origin→City	Bega	Origin→City	Kiremt	Low / High
Value type	Caloric/economic		Cultural/prestige		
Perishability	Moderate-high		Low		
Transport need	Bulk/heavy		Light/compact		
Substitutability	High (market)		Low (unique)		

Table 1 summarises the typological contrast between the two goods categories. Agricultural produce is bulk, perishable, caloric, and highly substitutable (urban markets sell equivalent products), whereas artisanal goods are light,

Material

The research was conducted in Addis Ababa (the primary destination site) and in selected origin communities in the Amhara Region (South Gondar and East Gojjam zones) and the Oromia Region (West Shewa and Jimma zones). These zones were chosen based on Central Statistical Agency data showing high out-migration rates to Addis Ababa ^[2]. Fieldwork was based at the Addis Ababa Centre for Rural Development Research, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and ran from March 2023 to January 2024, capturing all three agricultural seasons.

The target population comprised adults (aged 18+) residing in Addis Ababa who had migrated from one of the four selected zones within the preceding 20 years and who reported regular material exchanges with their origin household. Participants were recruited through a combination of community association registers and snowball sampling across four sub-cities (Bole, Yeka, Kirkos, and Addis Ketema). A total of 402 migrants completed the structured survey (response rate 87.8%). Forty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted: 28 with senders in Addis Ababa and 14 with receivers in origin villages.

Methods

The survey captured demographic characteristics, migration history, the TEI (24 items across six dimensions), a detailed transfer log for the preceding 12 months (type, quantity, estimated value, season, direction, and transport channel), and household food expenditure data. A before-and-after natural experiment exploited a documented four-week road closure on the Addis-Bahir Dar corridor in September 2023; 54 households with origin communities along this corridor provided transfer data for the disruption period and the equivalent period one year earlier.

Descriptive statistics summarised seasonal transfer patterns. Paired t-tests compared pre- and post-disruption transfer volumes. Radar plots visualised TEI profiles by migration duration. Qualitative interviews (40-75 minutes) were conducted in Amharic, recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically ^[8]. Ethical approval was obtained from the Addis Ababa Centre for Rural Development Research Ethics Board (Protocol AACRDR/2023/007, approved 12 February 2023). Written informed consent was secured from all participants.

durable, culturally specific, and difficult to replace with market purchases. This contrast explains their different resilience to transport disruptions.

Table 2: Before-and-after comparison of transfer volumes during the Addis-Bahir Dar road disruption (n = 54 households)

Transfer Type	Pre-Disruption	During Disruption	Change (%)
Agricultural produce (ETB)	8,420	4,450	-47.2 (p<0.001)
Artisanal goods (ETB)	3,180	2,590	-18.6 (p = 0.028)
Cash remittances (ETB)	5,740	5,610	-2.3 (p = 0.71)
Total non-cash goods (ETB)	11,600	7,040	-39.3 (p<0.001)

Table 2 quantifies the differential vulnerability. Agricultural produce suffered the steepest decline (47.2%), consistent with its bulk, weight, and perishability. Artisanal goods declined modestly (18.6%), as their portability allowed migrants to carry them via alternative transport (minibuses, personal vehicles, even air travel). Cash remittances, sent digitally, were effectively unaffected. This natural experiment demonstrates that the translocal economy's material component is logistically fragile in ways that its financial component is not. Interview data enriched these findings. Several respondents described the road disruption

period as a time of acute cultural anxiety: without the expected grain shipment, families in Addis Ababa had to purchase teff at inflated urban prices, which felt like a severing of connection to the land. One respondent said the grain she received was not just food it was proof that her family's farm was still productive and that she was still part of the household that worked it. Artisanal goods, though less economically significant, carried similar identity weight: a hand-woven basket from a grandmother was described by one interviewee as "worth more than anything I can buy in Mercato."

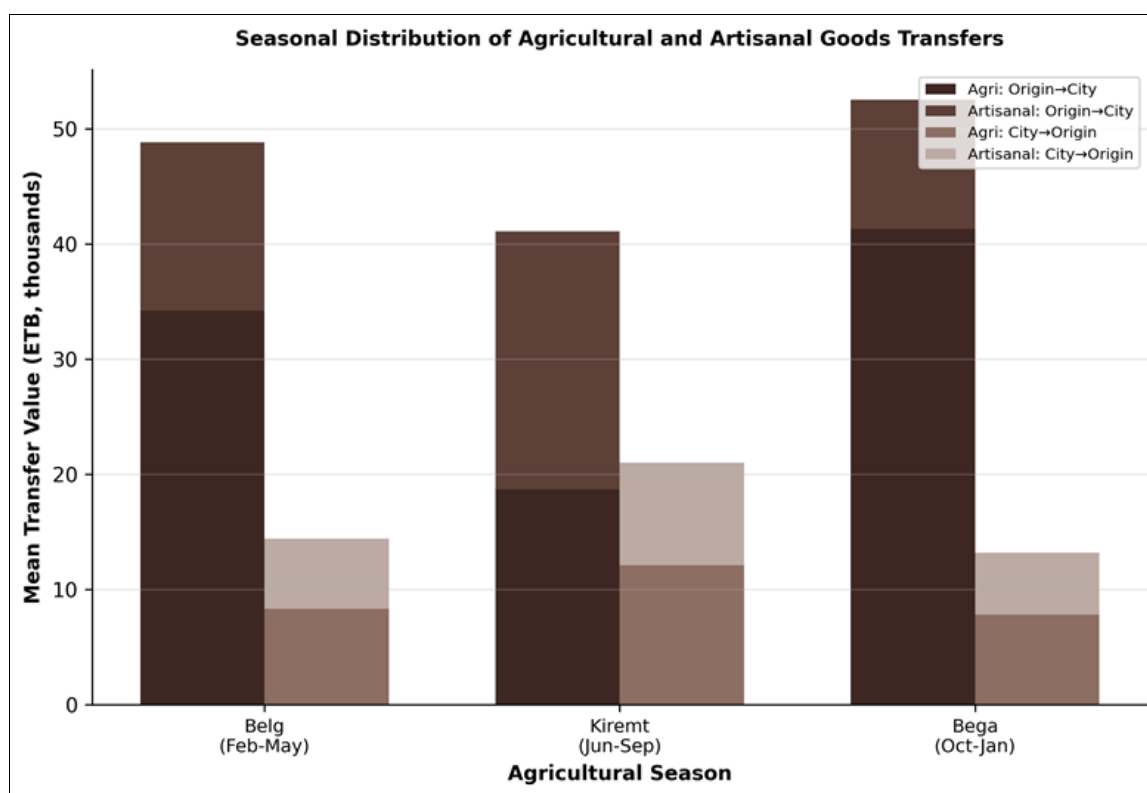
**Fig 1:** Seasonal distribution of agricultural and artisanal goods transfers by direction (mean value in ETB thousands, n = 402)

Figure 1 confirms the seasonal complementarity. Agricultural produce transfers from origin to city peaked in Bega (ETB 41,300 mean) when post-harvest surpluses were highest, while artisanal goods peaked in Kiremt (ETB

22,400) when the rainy season freed labour for craft production. City-to-origin flows were smaller and less seasonal, consisting mainly of manufactured goods and cash-purchased inputs.

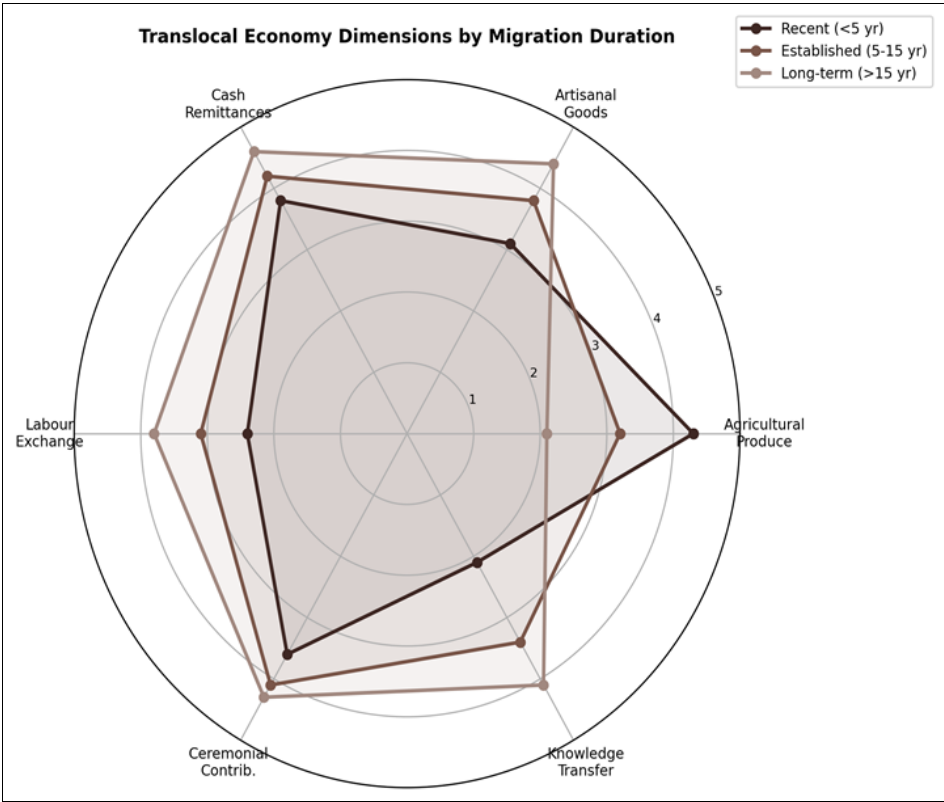


Fig 2: Radar plot of Translocal Economy Index dimensions by migration duration category (mean scores, 1-5 scale, n = 402)

Figure 2 shows how the translocal economy profile shifts with migration duration. Recent migrants scored highest on agricultural produce (4.3) and lowest on knowledge transfer (2.1), reflecting their strong reliance on origin-sourced food and limited integration into urban economic networks.

Long-term migrants showed a flatter, more balanced profile, with artisanal goods (4.4), ceremonial contributions (4.3), and knowledge transfer (4.1) all elevated, suggesting a gradual shift from caloric dependence to cultural and social engagement.

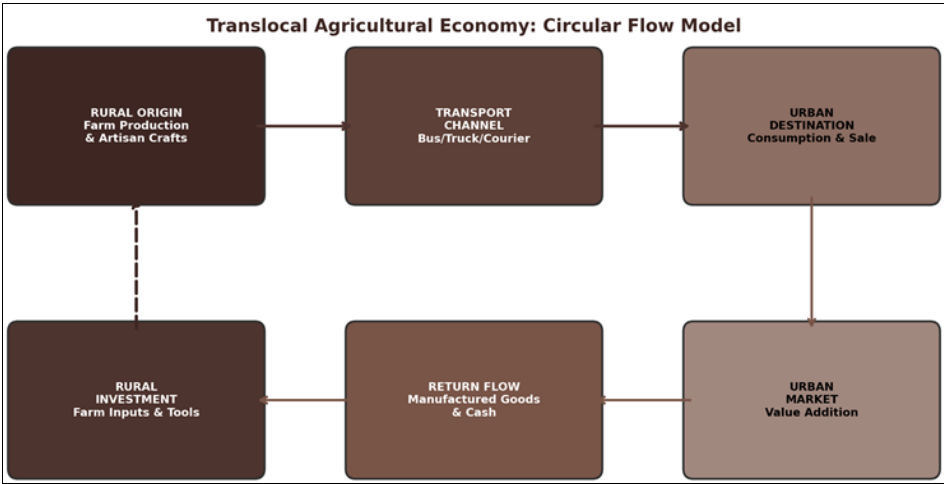


Fig 3: Circular flow model of the translocal agricultural economy: from rural production through urban consumption and back via return flows of manufactured goods and farm inputs

Figure 3 maps the full circular flow: rural origin sites produce agricultural goods and artisan crafts, which travel via transport channels to urban destinations for consumption and, in some cases, resale. Urban markets add value through processing and packaging. Return flows carry manufactured goods, cash, and farm inputs back to rural sites, where they are reinvested in the next production cycle. The dashed arrow indicates that this cycle is self-reinforcing when transport infrastructure remains functional.

Comprehensive interpretation
Taken together, the data argue that agricultural produce and artisanal goods are not separate categories of transfer but complementary pillars of a single translocal economy. Agriculture provides the caloric foundation cheap food for urban households, harvest-surplus redistribution while artisan craft provides the cultural scaffolding: objects that say “we are from here” in ways that cash and factory goods cannot. Their different seasonal rhythms, transport

vulnerabilities, and identity functions make them non-substitutable, which means that policies focused exclusively on cash remittances miss at least half of what keeps translocal economies running.

Case Analysis

To illustrate the dynamics captured by the survey, two contrasting household cases are presented. Household A, a dual-site family with a recent migrant (3 years in Addis Ababa), received an average of 45 kg of teff and 12 kg of berbere per quarter from the origin farm in East Gojjam. Artisanal transfers were minimal limited to a single woven basket gifted at New Year. The TEI profile was heavily agricultural (score 4.6) with low artisanal (1.8) and ceremonial (2.1) dimensions. During the road disruption, this household's food costs rose by 34%, causing measurable financial strain.

Household B, a multi-site family with a long-term migrant (18 years), presented a strikingly different picture. Agricultural transfers were modest (15 kg teff/quarter), but the household received regular shipments of hand-woven cotton from Wollo, silver jewellery from Harar, and pottery from Jimma. The TEI profile was balanced across all six dimensions. During the road disruption, total transfer value declined by only 11%, because the household's diversified portfolio included items that could travel via alternative channels. These two cases illustrate how migration duration shapes not just the volume but the composition and resilience of translocal economic engagement.

Discussion

The seasonal complementarity between agricultural and artisanal transfers is the central finding of this research. It mirrors Ethiopia's agricultural calendar in a way that cash remittances do not: Bega brings grain, Kiremt brings crafts, and the translocal economy pulses in time with the rural production cycle. This seasonality has been noted anecdotally in Ethiopian migration studies ^[3] but has not previously been quantified across a substantial sample.

The before-and-after disruption analysis adds a new dimension: logistical vulnerability. Agricultural produce, with its bulk and perishability, is acutely sensitive to transport interruptions. Artisanal goods, lighter and more durable, prove far more resilient. This differential has practical implications: if climate-related disruptions to highland road networks intensify, as projections suggest ^[9], the agricultural pillar of the translocal economy may weaken while the artisanal pillar persists. Households that diversify their translocal portfolios as long-term migrants tend to do will be better insulated. The TEI radar profiles by migration duration confirm a pattern observed in other African settings. Zoma and colleagues ^[11] documented a similar broadening of material exchange portfolios among long-term migrants in Burkina Faso, interpreting it as evidence that translocal engagement deepens rather than dissipates over time. The Ethiopian data reinforce this interpretation: long-term migrants don't disengage from the translocal economy; they shift their engagement from caloric dependence to cultural and ceremonial participation. From a policy perspective, two priorities emerge. First, investments in rural road maintenance particularly on corridors linking highland agricultural zones to Addis

Ababa have implications beyond commercial trade; they sustain the non-market material flows that underpin migrant household food security. Second, artisan craft promotion programmes should recognise the translocal market: urban migrants are not just nostalgic consumers but active participants in a value chain that connects rural producers to urban display and, increasingly, to export markets ^[10].

Conclusion

This research set out to examine how agricultural produce and artisanal goods function within the translocal economies of Ethiopian migrant families, with particular attention to seasonal patterns, vulnerability to disruption, and the evolution of translocal engagement over time. Three key findings emerged. First, agricultural and artisanal transfers follow complementary seasonal rhythms grain peaks in the post-harvest dry season, crafts peak in the rain-season production lull creating a year-round flow of goods that sustains both the material and cultural dimensions of translocal life. Second, the road disruption natural experiment showed that agricultural transfers are far more vulnerable to transport interruptions than artisanal goods, revealing a fragility in the translocal economy that cash-only analyses would miss entirely. Third, the Translocal Economy Index profiles demonstrate that migration duration reshapes but does not diminish engagement with the origin economy, with long-term migrants shifting from caloric dependence to culturally weighted exchanges. Practically, these findings argue for two interventions. Road infrastructure maintenance on highland-capital corridors should be treated as a food security issue, not just a commercial transport issue, given its demonstrated impact on non-market food transfers. And artisan craft programmes should be designed with translocal value chains in mind, connecting rural producers to the urban migrant market that already exists but operates informally. Looking ahead, Ethiopia's ongoing urban expansion and its ambitious road construction programme will reshape the transport infrastructure on which translocal economies depend. Whether these changes strengthen or weaken the material ties between city and countryside will depend on whether planners recognise that roads carry more than commodities they carry the physical substance of social relationships that keep families connected across distance.

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