



## Thinking Like a Migrant?

Closing the gap between macro-level policy and micro-level decision-making in Eritrean irregular migration

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## Abstract

One response to the ‘migration crisis’ has been to tackle the ‘root causes’ of migration through development programming. Populations prone to irregular migration often score poorly on issues such as poverty, jobs, and human rights. Remedying such issues might therefore be expected to reduce outmigration. However, the evidence of the relationship between development and irregular migration is weak. Most literature has focused on high level policies and macro-trends in migration. Yet, it is migrants’ own agency which is most decisive in whether departures actually happen. Drawing on surveys and interviews with Eritrean migrants carried out between 2014 and 2016, we aim to give insight into how migrants’ own perspectives on the migration process can inform development-led approaches to migration management.

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## Introduction

Amidst a ‘migration crisis’ in which over three million people applied for asylum between 2014-2016,<sup>1</sup> Eritreans have consistently featured among the most prominent national groups.<sup>2</sup> Over 33,000 applied for asylum in 2016, mostly in Germany and Italy.<sup>3</sup> Eritreans also comprised the fifth largest national group to arrive irregularly in Italy and Greece.<sup>4</sup>

The European Union (EU) and its member states have sought to counter the sense of crisis by reducing the volume of arrivals through deterrence and prevention. These have included information and awareness campaigns intended to influence the decision-making process,<sup>5</sup> and development-oriented programmes designed to counter the factors understood to prompt people to join irregular flows.

Development funding has been channelled through European bodies and bilateral overseas development assistance aid, which many countries had already been spending on processing asylum applications. The funding is awarded to international agencies and NGOs<sup>6</sup> to tackle factors that are believed to contribute to irregular emigration from key countries of origin. The spend on such programmes by the EU and member states in the Horn of Africa alone will easily surpass €1 billion.

Few of these resulting programmes, however, make explicit the expected effect of what are termed ‘upstream interventions’ on migration flows. Outcomes are instead measured according to conventional indicators of development success. The (often implicit) assumption is that successful development interventions will at the least not increase the number of irregular journeys, and ideally speaking, act to curb the number of departures. This assumption has been long critiqued by academics, who link increased development with a greater propensity to migrate, at least in the shorter term.

We argue that both approaches do not adequately take into account the inherent diversity of approaches to decision-making among residents of origin countries as diverse as West, East and North Africa, as well as the Middle East, South- and South-East Asia. The real and perceived opportunities open to people – and the desirability of irregular migration relative to them – vary between and within communities. It is how opportunity cost is calculated at the individual, micro level that determines the successes of macro-level policies to influence decisions.

Development has the potential to enlarge the range of opportunities available to would-be migrants, causing some segments of some populations to decide that options other than irregular migration are more attractive. These opportunities can be sedentary or involve

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>, accessed April 13, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis and Nigerians have been more prominent.

<sup>3</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>, accessed March 13, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Between January 1, 2016 and February 28, 2017, <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>, accessed April 13, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> For a definition and discussion of upstream interventions in their broader sense, see <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/TCM-migration-strategic-framework>, 8. The term is also used in discussions on the prevention of crime or public health issues. For the latter, see [https://www.cdc.gov/Pcd/issues/2010/jul/pdf/09\\_0249.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/Pcd/issues/2010/jul/pdf/09_0249.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Rights violations reported in Sudan and Ethiopia have seen the European Union repeatedly reiterate that no funding from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa is channelled through either government. See <http://www.euractiv.com/section/development-policy/news/weds-no-emergency-trust-fund-money-goes-to-ethiopian-government-commission-stresses/>.

mobility and legal migration. By understanding what kind of intervention makes alternatives to irregular migration desirable, viable and practicable – and for which groups or communities – an alignment of human development and migration management concerns becomes possible.

This paper draws on research conducted over a two year period in countries of origin, transit and destination to address a gap in our understanding of what the decision-making process of individual Eritreans tells us about the likely impact of ‘root cause’ policy interventions. By moving attention to the perspectives and motivations of individuals, we can produce findings that are useful for the design of more effective, efficient and ethically sound solutions – development-led and otherwise – for migrants on the move.

Five sections follow: 1) **Data sources**: a brief description of the methods and context behind the paper; 2) **Routes and reasons for departure**: how and why Eritrean migrants navigate the journey to Europe; 3) **Aspects of decision-making**: what influences the decision made along the way, why some destinations are more attractive than others, and reflection and regret; 4) **Upstream Interventions**: being aware of destination bias; 5) **Conclusion**: efficiency, efficacy and ethics, the three basic tenets for intervention on the development-irregular migration nexus.

## Data Sources

The research is based on a wide body of empirical work carried out by Seefar. From 2014-2017, Seefar conducted over 4,000 surveys with Eritrean migrants and potential migrants in the Horn of Africa, including Eritrea, North Africa, and Europe. The surveys and interviews formed part of multiple distinct projects, the results of which have been published internally.

The data is supplemented by periodic field reports from Seefar’s consultants stationed around the Horn of Africa. Key informant interviews carried out with stakeholders active in the refugee and migration space in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Libya, and Europe complement the data.

As insights are drawn from multiple projects, comparability across the data has not been possible. The paper is therefore best characterised as a discussion document, designed to provoke thought and innovation in migration research.

## Routes and Reasons for Departure

### Leaving Eritrea

We found that we could identify at least two categories of decision making among those exiting. The first was those who actively avoided or escaped national service. If they were not serving already, they had been made explicitly aware that this was imminent. Their motivation was guided less by the possibilities of life abroad, and more weighted towards avoidance of a tangible, perceived threat.

The second category had not yet been recruited to the national service. Their motivations were broader and much harder to generalise. They were aware of others who had entered national service, as well as those who had gone abroad. The sense of foreboding of what might come next, added to the knowledge that others had achieved apparently happy and successful lives abroad, combined to make departure a desirable option.

In 2016, the Eritrean government failed to make good on earlier assurances that it would reduce the national service length (from its current indefinite nature to the 18 months required by law) in exchange for European development assistance. Similar promises that there would be modest salary increases also seem to have been implemented for only a small subsection of national service members. The hope of European negotiators had been that these proposed changes to the national service would remove one of the key driving forces of irregular migration.

Respondents in the first category were themselves divided over whether reforms to national service would cause them to change their migration plans. Many did not trust the government and stated that a change in policy would not be enough to counter long-term disillusionment. Others intimated that the national service was only the symbolic surface of much more that made life intolerable in Eritrea.

Eritrean migrants travelling irregularly will depart the country and stop first in Sudan or Ethiopia. The decision on location will depend in part whether or not migrants have enlisted the help of a people smuggler.<sup>7</sup> Those living near the border areas would depart, often without the assistance of a people smuggler, through the nearest border crossing point. Those in towns close to the a particular Sudanese or Ethiopian border-crossing point, for example Teseney, located 30km from Sudan, depart through their closest border.

Others living further inside Eritrea have more to consider. First, they must overcome internal barriers to moving within the country.<sup>8</sup> This is often a deciding factor in those who enlist the help of a smuggler at the first stage and those who do not.

Second, they must consider the practical reality of crossing the border. The situation along

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<sup>7</sup> Our finding contrasts with that of the MEDMIG project, whose interviewees all left Eritrea with the assistance of a smuggler. See <http://www.fieri.it/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/research-brief-02-Understanding-the-dynamics-of-migration-to-Greece-and-the-EU.pdf>, 13.

<sup>8</sup> A permit system and network of checkpoints serves to control the movement of Eritreans within the country, preventing them from “travelling to border areas where their escape might be easier.” Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2014, in [http://www.gsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Fragility\\_Migration\\_Eritrea.pdf](http://www.gsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Fragility_Migration_Eritrea.pdf), 9.

Eritrea's border with Sudan has changed frequently as the result of Eritrea's relationship with the Sudanese government, as well as the influence of external actors on the migration policies of Sudan. On the other hand, the situation along the Eritrea-Ethiopia border has remained in a constant state of 'no peace, no war,' with sporadic exchanges of fire.<sup>9</sup> Other, perhaps more unexpected events also change border dynamics. The rainy season in 2016 led to reports of communicable disease spreading in parts of western Eritrea, leading the Sudanese government to temporarily suspend Eritreans' right to enter Sudan visa-free through the regular border crossing points.

Third, migrants must weigh the challenges of exiting Eritrea by any given border post with the perceived reality of life on the other side. The choice to approach the Sudanese or Ethiopian border requires migrants to trade opportunity with potential threats. Migrants understand that Sudan is a worse place to be due to their expected negative treatment by authorities. Getting caught trying to illegally exit Eritrea usually results in a prison sentence of several months.

There are often harsher consequences to getting caught in Ethiopia, where the shoot on sight policy is perceived to be more often followed through. Though riskier to cross into, Ethiopia is seen as a safer haven for its favourable policies towards Eritrean exiles and because of a sense of kinship between peoples on either side of the border. In addition, Eritreans arriving in Ethiopia do not have the same fear of being deported back to Eritrea compared to when they enter Sudan.

It is notable that the choice in leaving Eritrea is generally not made in terms of the quickest passage to Europe, but the most feasible way of departing the country. Throughout thousands of interviews, we encountered no Eritreans who had arranged to travel to Europe while still inside Eritrea. Many know of peers' success in reaching Europe and hold general ideas of what life is like, but even where a destination preference might be mentioned, concrete decisions on continuing onward from Ethiopia or Sudan to Europe or elsewhere, and choosing a precise destination, more often than not develop at a later stage in the journey.<sup>10</sup>

## Transit: Ethiopia and Sudan

Once Eritreans arrive in Sudan, if they encounter authorities they are generally taken to Shagarab refugee camp. Those who enter undetected move on to Khartoum. Migrants face considerable protection challenges on this segment of the journey, although their experiences are documented much less than the Mediterranean or even Libyan desert crossing.<sup>11</sup> In Ethiopia, rarely enter the country undetected due to the heavy militarisation of the border and are escorted to refugee camps in Tigray province and elsewhere.

Field reports from our consultants show that the initial experiences of Eritrean arrivals in the refugee camps are important in shaping their attitudes toward onward migration. The kind of

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<sup>9</sup> For example, a seemingly sudden clash between Eritrean and Ethiopian forces stationed along their common border was widely reported in June 2016. See BBC News (13 June 2016), *Ethiopia and Eritrea blame each other for border clash*, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36515503>.

<sup>10</sup> The section 'Aspects to Decision-Making: Choosing a destination' has more on this.

<sup>11</sup> The Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat's 4mi initiative has begun to draw attention to this, with protection monitors placed along this part of the route. See <http://4mi.regionalmms.org/4mi.html>.

reception and treatment upon entering refugee camps (either in Ethiopia or Sudan) play important roles in migrants' decisions. The sense of insecurity in Shagarab's refugee camps,<sup>12</sup> for example, is cited by many as the reason for swift onward travel to Khartoum. Once migrants arrive in the Ethiopian refugee camps in particular, they are often received by earlier arrivals from the same village. They are given shelter and companionship, and crucially begin to receive information about options for onward travel. A comparison of migrants' knowledge inside and outside of Eritrea shows a remarkable increase in those responding correctly to questions about the journey and destination once they had spent time in refugee camps.

Moreover, money to defray the costs is usually collected and sent to the transit countries from relatives or other co-villagers who have managed to get to Europe, North America, Israel, or other places (and sometimes even wealthy individuals in the transit country). An example is a well-known story among Eritreans who have travelled through Sudan, of an Eritrean hotel owner in Sudan who would let people from his village stay and eat for free. He would then be reimbursed from a communal 'village fund'.

The contrasting experiences in both countries also determine to what extent migrants feel they have the options and possibility to remain. While it is quite common for Eritreans to live and work in Sudan and Ethiopia, often informally, experiences with work were not uniform. In Sudan, only a small minority<sup>13</sup> cited economic reasons for onward travel, suggesting that finding a job in Sudan is not the principle issue for migrants. In a number of cases, Eritreans had established livelihoods in Sudan that had persisted for several months or years, but found an increase in harassment made it impossible to continue with daily life.

This contrasted sharply with those surveyed in Ethiopia and Eritrea, who tended not to cite one clear reason. Rather, reasons were split more or less evenly between safety, income and job security. Those citing low incomes as the reason they wanted to move on from Ethiopia tended to be people with relatively high education and income levels. Job offers for this category would need to be commensurate with skill and salary expectations to have appeal and influence decisions.<sup>14</sup>

While those with a basic education were less likely to worry about *underemployment* in Ethiopia, they were more likely to think that the European job market was in need of people 'like them.' Qualitative inquiry did not reveal an understanding of the European job market, however, or knowledge of a possible 'demographic crisis' that would demand large-scale low-skilled immigration. What is evident is that new arrivals to Europe are often surprised at the difficulties faced on the job market. More research would be needed to understand if this sub-section of migrants—less educated and looking for work—would find the offer of work resulting from the Jobs Compact in Ethiopia<sup>15</sup> an acceptable substitute for what is perceived to be on offer in Europe.

Data collected in 2016 showed that jobs and livelihoods may well be the biggest issue in

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2013/1/510275a19/unhcr-concern-refugee-kidnappings-disappearances-eastern-sudan.html>; and [http://www.regionalmms.org/images/sector/TCM\\_Development\\_Horwood.pdf](http://www.regionalmms.org/images/sector/TCM_Development_Horwood.pdf), 10.

<sup>13</sup> In one survey it was less than one in ten.

<sup>14</sup> A 2017 report from the Overseas Development Institute echoes this. See <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11336.pdf>, 22.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-37433085>.

Ethiopia (even if what that means for migrant choices needs rationalising). In Sudan, however, the majority of those wanting to leave do so because they do not feel safe. The reasons stem from a continued sense of insecurity in Sudanese refugee camps, and a perception that deportations have increased over the past years. Sudanese authorities' apparently increased efforts to police illegal migration, and round up Eritrean migrants along the way, has created conditions of uncertainty for many Eritreans who had previously had established livelihoods. With migrants considering return to Eritrea out of the question, onward migration can quickly look like the only solution. In terms of finance and distance relative to the perceived rewards on arrival, Europe holds wide appeal.

## Transit: Libya, and the Mediterranean

Finding smugglers in places such as Khartoum and Kassala is 'easy'. In Shagarab's camps, *samsari* (brokers) seek migrants out, trying to sell them the idea of onward travel towards (but usually not to) Europe. In certain quarters of Kassala and Khartoum, the story is the same. The journey is arranged through compatriots, who plan to transport migrants into the Libyan desert, before handing them to Libyan groups for the next leg of the journey.

Egypt is an option too, but is chosen by relatively fewer migrants. It has always been less popular, mostly because of a perception that the chance of success is less, though consultants did notice an increase in Eritreans opting for Egypt towards the end of 2016. Some did so citing the relatively better prospects of resettlement through UNHCR there. Others believed the passage through Egypt and from Alexandria is safer.<sup>16</sup> This may also reflect a deterrent effect caused by the mobilisation of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces to restrict flows in the Libyan desert.

For Eritreans who enter Libya, the mindset quickly turns to one of resolve. The possibility to live a 'normal' life has diminished considerably since the 2011 revolution. Prior to that, it was relatively common for Eritreans to work in Libya and save for passage to Europe.<sup>17</sup> Eritreans established in Libya with strong local networks did appear to have some elements of normalcy to their lives. But for most, consultants and migrants alike reported the impossibility of leading lives outside of their accommodation, whether privately rented or smuggler-owned, without a high risk of assault or kidnap. Remaining in Libya is therefore increasingly considered untenable by resident Eritreans as well as those transiting more purposively towards Europe.

The preceding steps in the journey also shape this view. The hardships of the Libyan desert – widely conceived as the harshest part of the journey to Europe – increase the resolve of migrants to continue the journey. Where the choice is limited to raising the funds to continue to Europe, or to return to Sudan, migrants perceive turning back to require almost equal sacrifice in re-crossing the desert, with no guarantees that they would be able to (re-)settle in Sudan.

The fear of the sea crossing remains very real. In a 2015 survey of 63 Eritrean migrants in

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<sup>16</sup> The arguments of Peter Tinti and Tuesday Reitano in 'Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Sailor' echo this. They discuss Syrians' perceptions of the relative seaworthiness of vessels leaving from Egypt compared to Libya.

<sup>17</sup> Seefar, How will Migrants and Smugglers Respond to the EU's Anti-Smuggling Plans? July, 2015, privately circulated.

Libya,<sup>18</sup> respondents reported both apprehension before the crossing and the confidence-boosting phone calls of people who had made it onto the Italian mainland. These phone calls would downplay the risks, that the sea crossing was ‘not as bad as they say.’ As an Italian stakeholder involved with arrivals told us, the overwhelming relief experienced by migrants on arrival in Lampedusa meant that phone calls back to Libya and home often omitted the worst aspects of the journey. Indeed, for migrants the stories of successful arrival vastly outweigh tragedy, especially in a situation in Libya in which there is little else to put hope.

## Aspects to Decision-Making

### Consulting others

While we argue that the individual perspectives in decision-making are neglected, we do not suggest that decisions are taken in isolation. Who and what influence migration decisions in Eritrea and along the route? Qualitative data collected with Eritreans after arrival showed that while still in Eritrea, conversations with peers about impending plans are much more likely than conversations with family, who almost always oppose plans to leave irregularly. Through peers and online contact with those living abroad, basic information about how to begin the journey is gathered, and the necessary preparations are taken to cope with the physical, emotional and financial risks.

We found that migrants consistently counted on the support of their family without discussing the migration plan with them explicitly.<sup>19</sup> A paradox is apparent whereby embarking on dangerous irregular journeys is staunchly opposed, while successfully migrating is culturally celebrated. Would-be migrants therefore keep plans secret from family until the moment comes to count on the support of family networks, either in destination countries or at home,<sup>20</sup> or until they have successfully completed their journeys. Migrants therefore do not see any moral issue with the journey, confident that they are taking the risks for wider family and community benefit.

### Choosing destinations

We found that Eritrean migrants are much less likely to choose a destination before departing Eritrea and more open to altering their choice along the way compared to other migrant groups.<sup>21</sup> In fact, data collected from Eritreans who had arrived at destination showed a majority

<sup>18</sup> Seefar, How will Migrants and Smugglers Respond to the EU's Anti-Smuggling Plans? July, 2015, privately circulated.

<sup>19</sup> Milena Belloni's aptly titled paper "My uncle cannot say 'no' if I reach Libya" reflects a similar sentiment. Migrants leave without seeking approval from family members, but expect (and receive) their support when it is called upon later in the journey. See <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=hg-255-belloni.pdf&site=2>.

<sup>20</sup> We found a roughly even split between those raising money to finance onward travel from networks at home and family members already at potential destinations in Europe.

<sup>21</sup> This contrasts most strikingly in our data with Afghan irregular migrants, who are more likely to be consistent in their destination preferences at each stage of the journey. For discussion of this, see <http://Seefar.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Seefar-Comparisons-Final-Report.pdf>.

claiming that they decided on their final European destination once arrived in Italy.<sup>22</sup>

Most of those who changed their plans had originally intended to travel to the United Kingdom, Sweden or Germany but once arrived in Italy considered them too difficult to reach (on the advice of family and friends). There was also widespread awareness of the basic mechanics of the Dublin Regulation. In qualitative interviews we found most migrants agreeing that once fingerprinted, onward travel would not be worth attempting.

Migrants and potential migrants in Eritrea, Sudan and Ethiopia were often reluctant to name a destination preference. This reiterates the shaping of migration preferences after departure from Eritrea and later in the journey. There was a sense of which destinations would be better than others. The UK, Scandinavia and Germany were consistently cited as places that offer the best prospects for education or employment – the two most important factors guiding migrants' reasoning on destination. However, the factors guiding migrants' reasoning on destination may not necessarily be the same as the initial impetus to *escape* from Eritrea. During qualitative interviews with Eritrean migrants both in Europe and in East Africa, we observed that while in Eritrea, Eritreans primarily thought more about what they are escaping from than about what they may gain in the destination countries. The broad reference to 'pull factors' at the early stages of migration is therefore misleading.

National networks mattered too in choosing a destination. Eritreans generally preferred destinations where they had family. However, there were numerous occasions where interviewees reported that family in one country told them to migrate to another one. A typical example is a Norway-based Eritrean telling a relative to go to Germany, because getting to Norway and claiming asylum was too difficult.

There was little explicit awareness of migration policy in destination countries, adding importance to the information received from 'advisors' in Europe. There is some idea that it is easier to claim asylum in some countries than it is in others, but respondents could never explain why or allude to a specific law or policy. Similarly, there was little evidence that migrants had accurate knowledge of their entitlements as asylum seekers and refugees, except a general sense that there would be some kind of safety net. As has been concluded elsewhere,<sup>23</sup> policies aimed at creating harsh conditions for asylum seekers likely do not have a deterrent effect proportionate to the hardship they cause.

## Considering alternatives

For those who do not migrate to Europe, options are broadly limited to irregular or legal migration elsewhere, local integration, and return. A limited number of those we consulted travelled south to Uganda, others travelled to the Middle East. However, the purposive sampling technique we employed across the research, where we actively sought those

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<sup>22</sup> In other cases, such as Iranians on the Eastern Mediterranean and Balkans routes, it is not unusual for smugglers to offer packages from Iran to the final destination in a European Member State (practically speaking, smugglers contracted out the Turkey-Greece leg of the trip to partners in Istanbul). See <http://Seefar.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Seefar-Comparisons-Final-Report.pdfm> 3.

<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.fieri.it/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/research-brief-02-Understanding-the-dynamics-of-migration-to-Greece-and-the-EU.pdf>, 7; and <http://Seefar.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Seefar-Who-Dares-Wins-Iranian-Refugees-and-Irregular-Migration-to-the-European-Union.pdf>, 15.

planning to go to Europe, means that little can be read into this.

Many remain in the refugee camps and urban centres in Sudan and Ethiopia. While Eritrean migrants report that they are aware of possibilities for resettlement through private sponsorship (e.g. to Canada and Australia) or via UNHCR screening, many are willing to abandon resettlement plans. Several interviewees who left the refugee camps in Ethiopia report that they know fellow migrants who abandoned the resettlement process because of the length of time it took.

The creation of jobs and offer of livelihood opportunities is not always taken at face value by migrants. Schemes such as the Jobs Compact can be viewed with suspicion: corruption; control; extending the life of repressive governance regimes that are the *root causes* of their flight. Migrants understand that macro-level prescriptions purportedly designed to alleviate their plight are formulated and implemented in collaboration with the same regimes they run away from, the 'fruits of a poisonous tree'.<sup>24</sup> The association of these opportunities and others with distrusted governments from the region and Europe can make migrants circumspect. The quality of the opportunity matters less than migrants' perceptions of the quality.

## Risks, Regret and Reflection

Respondents were consistent in having realistic expectations of the dangers and suffering that they would face on the journey. In all our interactions with Eritrean migrants in Eritrea and the first countries of transit, the vast majority recognised that they risked kidnapping, assault and death. News of deaths in the Mediterranean and hardships on either side of the sea crossing are now well known within Eritrea, and play a major part in families' widespread opposition to members embarking on the journey.

Migrants tended to accept the risk but move onwards anyway. Two reasons for this are put forward by Townsend and Oomen: one, people are not good at calculating risk, and two, the risk of death or injury seem worth taking, because the chances of 'success' in the short or long term are perceived to be high.<sup>25</sup> Hypothetical risks seem abstract when compared with the tangible hardships experienced at home.<sup>26</sup>

Many recent arrivals said that they were warned of the desert crossing before departure but were nonetheless surprised at the extent to which they suffered. When asked why such warnings were not heeded, both groups suggest that would-be migrants simply do not 'believe' the warnings of those who have made it.

However, 'belief' suggests that departing migrants think Eritreans in the diaspora are giving them false information. Why would the diaspora, who are relied upon for practical and financial support throughout the journey, simultaneously provide false or exaggerated information about its hazards? One explanation is that migrants do not want to believe the warnings, and wilfully disregard information that detracts from a decision based on hope and the emotional pull of

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<sup>24</sup> Quote from a conversation with a consultant in Ethiopia.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/boat-understanding-migrant-journey>, 10.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/boat-understanding-migrant-journey>, 5.

Europe.

Eritreans in the diaspora, including recent arrivals, tended to regret the fact that others would undertake a similar journey. They thought that others departing Eritrea and the Horn of Africa were like them: migrating with a poor understanding of the reality of the journey, and unrealistic expectations of what awaited at destination.<sup>27</sup> But there was also a widespread feeling that newly departing Eritreans had no choice but to leave their home country, and move on from transit countries. Moreover, they felt that once they had left Sudan and travelled into Libya, they were 'at the point of no return.' Once someone had endured the Libyan desert, there is either no merit in turning back, or repeating the journey is foolhardy given its dangers.

## Upstream Interventions: targeting the right issues

The reasons why journeys are completed, abandoned or suspended are essential to understanding whether there is an alignment between migrants' needs and migration management objectives to reduce numbers.

Part of the challenge in sufficiently specifying the issues prompting decisions to migrate is a bias in research and debate towards the perspective of destination countries. The issue is not just that a disproportionate volume of migration research is carried out in European countries of destination. More problematic is the framing of migrants' decisions in European legal and normative terms that reflect poorly migrants' own perspectives. This approach may miss cultural or context-based reasons for decisions, leading to skewed conclusions.

European asylum systems necessarily distinguish between refugee and non-refugee populations. Yet, when the refugee-economic migrant binary is applied to decision-making—and upstream interventions aimed at influencing decision making—we reduce the complex process of deciding to leave one's country of origin to the basic tenets of refugee status determination. This is a problem because it means that upstream interventions are based on European asylum systems rather than the decision-making of individual migrants.

Eritrean migrants' high rates of asylum success in Europe<sup>28</sup> mean that discussion tends to reflect the binary distinction of the Refugee Convention. Humans, however, do not think in binary terms. Eritrean migrants, regardless of whether or not they qualify for refugee protection, move because of a blend livelihood and protection considerations. This is why the relative safety of refugee camps in Northern Ethiopia does not persuade migrants against dangerous journeys to Europe. It is also why new jobs in industrial parks may not be wholly effective.

Three more factors can confuse understanding of decision-making:

1. **Migrants adopt human rights language in interviews with researchers.** This is

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<sup>27</sup> We found that nearly half of Eritreans who had arrived at what they considered to be their final destination in Europe found life there to be 'worse than [they] expected.' See <http://Seefar.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Seefar-Comparisons-Final-Report.pdf>, 6. Nearly 9 in 10 from the same dataset stated that they did not have enough money to maintain a satisfactory standard of living.

<sup>28</sup> In the third quarter of 2016, the positive recognition rate of Eritrean applications for international protection stood at 90% on average across the European Union. The majority of applications for asylum were lodged in Germany. [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum\\_quarterly\\_report](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report)

prevalent in interviews carried out after arrival, often when migrants have received advice on their asylum claim. Humans generally do not automatically generate neat narratives of their past, but must construct it on demand. The complex interplay of emotions and options present at the time of departure can give way to a sanitised, rights-friendly narrative after arrival, with no deception on the part of the migrant.

2. **'Motivations' change retroactively.** Were somebody to leave Eritrea irregularly for reasons primarily related to not being able to earn a living, they are nonetheless likely to be subject to disproportionate punishment for illegal exit. At destination, migrants might therefore correctly report their reasons for exile in terms of the repressive measures they would face should they return to the country. Yet this only became a reason for migration after departure and so cannot be considered part of the initial decision-making process.
3. **Migrants misreport their own motivations.** For example, while a job may be a major reason for migration, the counter-factual does not necessarily hold. Migrants often told us that if they could find a job, they would not leave. But it is more difficult to measure whether getting a job would actually remove the desire to migrate. Methods that reach beyond conventional question and answer interviews, such as participant observation, may be effective in overcoming these limitations.

## Conclusion

There is space for development actors to apply their expertise and experience to European efforts to reduce irregular migration earlier in the migration chain. To be effective, development actors will need to make sure programming targets issues relevant in the decision-making processes of carefully identified groups of people, recognising that some categories will require other humanitarian and development measures.

Moreover, by identifying those potential migrants who are amenable to the mitigation of 'their' migration drivers, we will be better able to identify those for whom upstream interventions are inappropriate, and target them for other solutions, such as resettlement.

There is, however, still a considerable distance to travel before we have the necessary knowledge to intervene effectively. This knowledge gap is substantive—we need to know more about migrants—but also technical, in that we do not yet have an accepted technique to collect information robustly and quickly enough to keep up with changing context. Highly contextualised development interventions thus do not lend themselves easily to the creation of a replicable or scalable blueprint. Nevertheless, there are three principles that should be carried forward in further discussions along the irregular migration-development nexus.

- **Efficacy** – achieving and demonstrating the intended impact. Where money is spent, it must be spent on developing opportunities—or access to and understanding of opportunities—that tip the balance away from irregular journeys when potential migrants calculate opportunity cost of life choices. It is not effective, for example, to create low wage jobs for a population that is already employed in low wage work and

whose prime motive is to secure higher wages.

- Efficiency – achieving value for money. Billions of euros are currently being spent at the bilateral and multilateral levels to reduce irregular migration. Much of this is justified by the high ranking of certain countries in EU asylum figures. This misses the point. Money allocated to countering the drivers of irregular migration must take account of when, where and why decisions are made. Further research and systematic evaluation of development initiatives can shed light on how to spend root cause funding in places where returns are greater.
- Ethics – upholding the right to international protection and not undermining existing development and humanitarian objectives. For interventions to be compatible with the intentions of human development, they should not further constrain a limited set of options. Rather, they should increase opportunities in a manner which makes the allure of irregular migration fade.

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