POLICY BRIEF No. 3

Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law

Reprogramming the Mix of Interventions to Support Refugees in Host Communities

Picture, 2017, Hitsats Refugee Camp, Tigray region (Ethiopia). Photo by Mirjam van Reisen (copyrights)

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ZOA
RELIEF | HOPE | RECOVERY

March 2018

Tilburg University

Summary

This study investigates the dynamics of migratory trajectories from Eritrean refugees' place of origin to the host communities. The focus is on Eritrean migrants that leave Eritrea through Sudan or Ethiopia and who end up directly, or return eventually to the refugee camps in these countries.

The research looks at four different themes. Firstly, the modus operandi of human traffickers along the route. Secondly, the unaccompanied minors and youth in the refugee camps and their strategies to be resilient and autonomous. Thirdly, the effects of trauma and post-traumatic stress among the refugees and tools to support them. Fourthly, issues regarding livelihood.

On the cover of this policy brief you see a picture of Tesfay (not his real name). When Tesfay fled Eritrea around 2009 he was abducted and trafficked to the Sinai desert where he was severely tortured (picture 1). He was forced by mobile phone to collect a ransom of over 30.000 dollars. His wife Sarah (not her real name), to whom he was married in Eritrea had travelled to Saudi Arabia where she was working under very bad conditions. She collected with other family members the ransom for his release. After his release the Egyptian military captured him and put him in prison. From inside the prison he had to collect money again for his release and transfer to Ethiopia. When he arrived in Ethiopia, he was transferred to the recently established Hitsats refugee camp in the Tigray region. Because this camp was new when he arrived there were no services yet – there was hardly water. The area where Hitsats is located exist out rock, is very dry, and very hot. In the camp there was one tree near the main road. Tesfay realised that on the spot of the tree, there must be water, and he started digging in the ground until he found water. When he reached the water he constructed a well, all by himself. After the well, he built cabins and now, all residents in Hitsats can take a cold shower for a few cents. Sarah, who was still in Saudi Arabia, came to Hitsats to join him in the camp and to help him with the small business.

The story of Tesfay is not a single story. Many refugees have been target to human traffickers or have relatives that have been abducted. Not only abduction and torture outside of Eritrea is familiar among the people, but also severe torture and abduction in Eritrea and by Eritrean government officials is known and leads to fear among the refugees.

These refugees are dealing with trauma and post-traumatic stress (PTS) and live in an environment where treatment or help is minimal or absent.

Besides adults, there are many unaccompanied minors in the refugee camps and especially in Hitsats. Between January 2014 and August 2017, 5738 unaccompanied minors arrived there. These minors stay in the camp for years before they decide to leave, to return or to stay. The minors do not apply for resettlement procedures other than family-reunification.

Further issues in refugee camps can be found in a lack livelihood opportunities. There are insufficient means from the organizational side, and the NGOs are facing challenges regarding livelihood support and income generating activities.

The research focus on ICT dimensions of the modus operandi of the human traffickers (i.e. torture by phone and begging for ransom by phone), but also on the role of mobile phones in maintaining relationships and long-distance money collection and transfers. Furthermore, possibilities for trauma support for refugees via mobile phones are investigated and livelihood programmes and relief opportunities for unaccompanied minors are studied.

Journeys and human traffickers

Eritreans who leave Eritrea encounter with many dangers on their routes, which start already in Eritrea itself. As described in the introduction, abduction, torture and (sexual) violence are the main dangers. Other dangers the refugees encounter include:

- Payments demanded resulting from irregular status of migrants/refugees
- Destruction of ID cards
- Police campaigns (giffas) in urban areas in Sudan
- Persecution through intelligence services
- Collaboration between different agencies/government authorities in Sudan
- Impunity for crimes of human traffickers
- Lack of responsiveness for protection by authorities
- Refoulement to Eritrea
- Tensions between refugee and host communities
- Disappearance/drowning

All above are serious problems all refugees deal with during their journeys. These findings came forward from interviews and observations in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan.

Unaccompanied minors and youth in Hitsats

If refugees arrive in refugee camps, such as Hitsats, these dangers decrease. For refugees who arrive directly after fleeing Eritrea or via Sudan – or other routes (like Tesfay in the introduction), new difficulties and problems appear such as:

- Lack of safety
- Infiltration by intelligence
- Insufficient water and Insufficient food calories
- Inadequate schooling
- Inadequate health facilities
- Lack of fuel and access to cooking fuel and electricity
- Lack of connectivity
- Lack of Out-of-Camp opportunities
- Lack of perspectives on work and legalization

These issues were observed in Sudan and Ethiopia. The latest research focused mainly on the camp situations. In Hitsats for example there is a scarcity of all basic resources; food, water, shelter, hygiene, education and relief opportunities. Every month, the refugees can pick up there rations which exist out of 10 kg of wheat and 60 Ethiopian Birr (equals approx. €2,50). When these rations are distributed, the residents of Hitsats are in a state of stress and only focussed on when to go to the distribution point. Secondary education in Hitsats is absent which hits a vast part of the unaccompanied minors.

Another issue in the camps is the lack of connectivity. Whereas the mobile phone is used in extortion practicalities, it is also a very important tool for many to stay in contact with relatives all over the world and in order to receive remittances. The connectivity in Hitsats is very bad; only between 12am and 6am the connection could be qualified as good. During the day the people used tricks to grasp a weak signal. Tricks included calling 112, the emergency number – the camp residents had to call up to 15 times 112 to establish a connection on which they could receive a message, open a Facebook page or make a phone call. Other tricks that were used included finding mountains in the camp were the signal was stronger or through applications that improve connectivity.

Trauma self-help in camp

Since many refugees in the Ethiopian camps suffer from trauma and PTS, a tool is developed that can offer support on a low cost and is easy accessible for the refugees. The Self-Help Low-Cost Post-Traumatic Stress programme (SHLCPTS) is based on Eye Movement Desensitizing and Reprocessing (EMDR) techniques and was offered via videos on mobile phones to the refugees in the camps. The tool is tested in the refugee camps Hitsats and Shimelba (and traumatised communities in Sudan) among 100 respondents. The results showed that SHLCPTS had a very positive effect on social economic resilience (see figure 1 to 3).
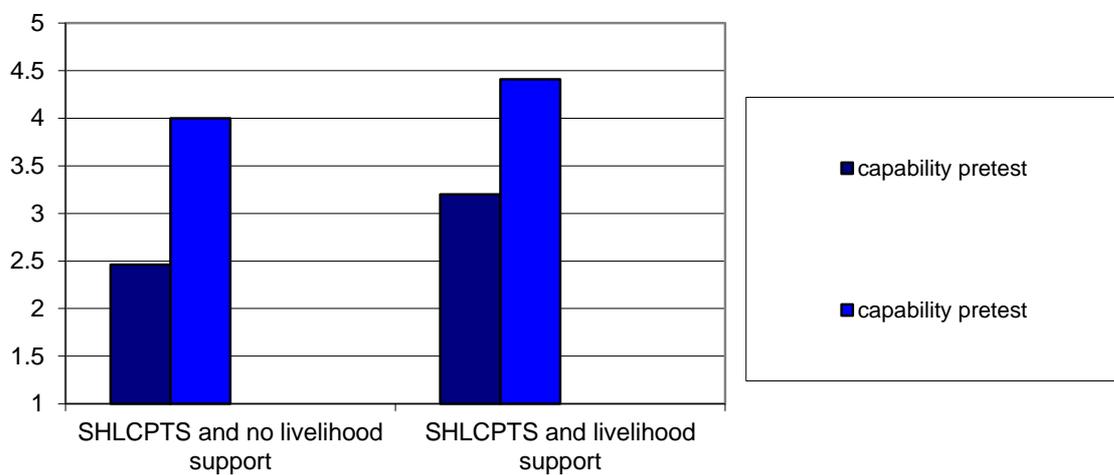

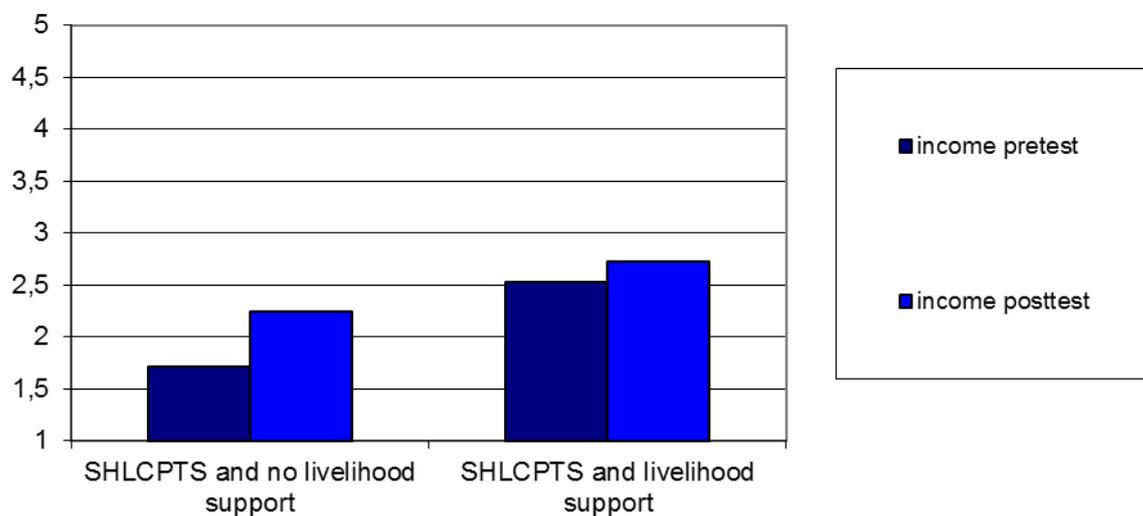Figure 1: averages of the groups on Capability.

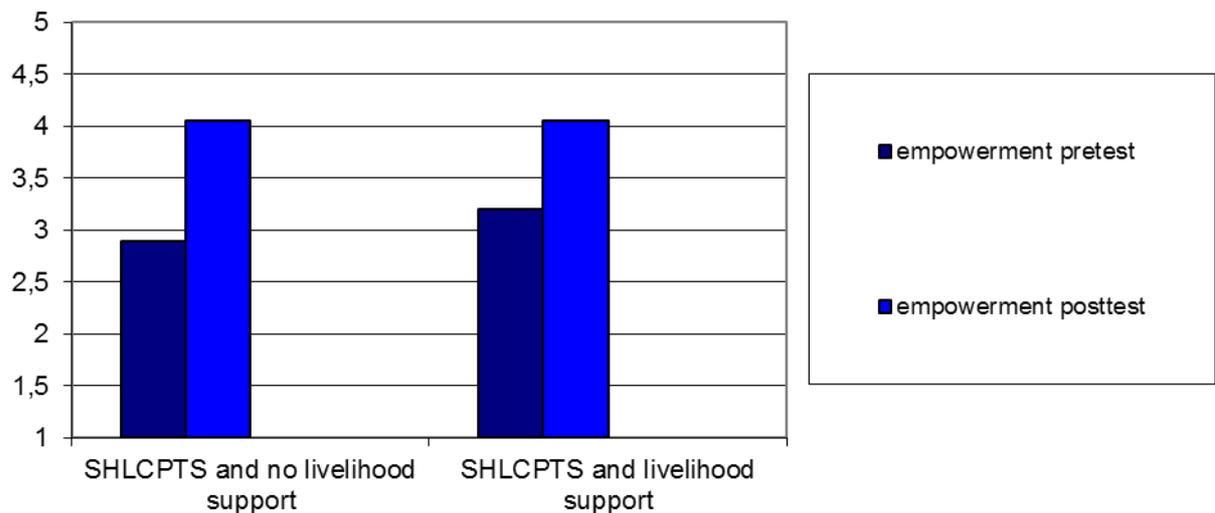Figure 2: averages of the groups on Income.

Figure 3: averages of the groups on Empowerment

Livelihood

Another issue in the camps is the lack of livelihood opportunities or activities that generate a small income. This issue was researched in Hitsats refugee camp. Possibilities to generate an income are minimal and mainly informal. This is one reason for a strong drive to secondary movement and leads to drop-outs in existing livelihood programs that are offered by several NGOs in the camp. The organizations also face saturation in certain income generating activities. Good observation included micro-loan opportunities for refugees to start small businesses and the willingness of organizations and government to improve and support livelihood programmes.

Implications for policy

The findings on the migration routes and in the refugee camps in Ethiopia can contribute to strengthen policies regarding security issues, refugee camp policies that improve relief opportunities and trauma support. The implications for policy are divided in four themes: combatting human trafficking, unaccompanied minors and youth in refugee camps, trauma relief, and livelihood policies.

Combat human trafficking

- Build up understanding in host countries and the international community of common values to the need to combat human trafficking at the source
- Strengthen rule of law based approaches to the combat of human trafficking

- Agree clear messages to fight impunity of criminal human trafficking networks from the top and the need to ensure there is no Eritrean government infiltration in such networks
- Enhance a coherent strategy and information campaign on a policy to root out human trafficking from the top of the human trafficking organisations
- Strengthen coherent messages with faith-based and local organisations on a value driven approach to building a conducive environment for integration of migrants and refugees in the region and the desirability to combat human trafficking
- Set up exchange programmes at a decentralised level between protection agencies, local authorities and local universities and knowledge institutes to share experiences and create information flows between locations that connect routes of mobility and human trafficking

Unaccompanied minors and youth

- Channels of trust used by minors and youth in low connectivity areas and build up interactive channels of communication
- Fluidity of human trafficking risks exposing migrant/refugee communities and host communities
- Development of positive information strategies, including opportunities in sports, work and other community perspectives within and between migrant/refugee and host communities
- Ensure information on risks is integrated in 'positive feelings' to ensure processing
- Ensure credibility of information on policies and avoid contradictions (instruction to 'stay' combined by repression and impunity)
- Enhance measures to combat human trafficking at top level and provide clear information on this to strengthen sense of rule of law and protection
- Strengthen digital connectivity of youth

Trauma relief

- Preparedness in terms of mental health is crucial for the success of livelihood-programmes
- Measure PTS among migrants/refugees communities at reception points
- Collaborate with local authorities and protection agencies to inventories
- Integrate Self Help Low Cost PTS programmes to relief trauma
- Prepare the migrant/refugee communities to strengthen their resilience
- Ensure targeting and cost benefit of action by strengthening evidence based research to provide evidence of cost benefit balance of approaches

Livelihood and out-of-camp policies

- Needs for livelihoods in high migrant/refugee density areas
- Strengthen upscaled livelihood programmes focused on basic needs and work opportunities as well as legalisation of status and work permits and out-of-camp policy
- Facilitate legal support by diaspora communities through remittances for small business investment and opportunities
- Strengthen mutual support programmes to help integration of migrant/refugee communities and host communities

Conclusions

Since ICT play an increasing role in mixed migration and human trafficking, its differentiated positive and negative effects need to be studied in context.

This research looked at refugees and unskilled migrants from Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan residing in Ethiopia and Sudan. The research looked at dynamics between refugees, returnee migrants and recipient communities. Negative information shared by ICT enhances trauma and causes collective trauma which decreases positive expectations of opportunities.

Human trafficking networks use ICTs for new modus operandi. Human trafficking networks target migrant and refugee communities through ICTs and dynamically shift locations. Fighting human trafficking in one location causes shifts to other locations, including receiving communities. The precarious conditions of livelihoods, lack of basic needs and of security in camps increases vulnerability of minors and youth refugees as easy prey to human trafficking.

To enhance integration in the region, increasing interaction between youth of host communities and of refugee communities linked to out-of-camp policies are important. Moreover, interventions to relief trauma through ICTs enhance the effects of livelihood policies on social-economic resilience. A survey among 100 refugees demonstrated the highly significant positive effects of trauma relief on social-economic resilience (especially on expectations of income, capabilities and on empowerment).

The purpose of the policy brief is: Rethinking and reprograming of the mix of interventions to increase impact on the integration of these migrants into local communities based on understanding of their communication pathway.

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Cite as: *Reisen, van, M., Stokmans, M., Kidane, S., Melicherova, K., Schoenmaeckers, R. (ed. Schoenmaeckers, R.) (2018) Reprogramming the Mix of Interventions to Support Refugees in Host Communities. Policy Brief, Tilburg University*

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