POLICY BRIEF No. 4 - SHORT

Digital Realities in Human Trafficking: Bringing Safety to Refugee Camps

Picture, 2015, Mai Aini Refugee Camp, Northern Ethiopia. Photo by Mirjam van Reisen (copyrights)

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This policy brief focuses the dynamics of migratory trajectories. The research looks at two issues. 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 maintain contact with relatives abroad.

The conclusions are that ICTs are used as a method by human traffickers and criminals for extortion, but on the other hand play an important role for refugees, since it is the only way to stay in contact with their beloved ones and because it is a means to send or receive long-distance money-transfers. The methods how to use mobile phones in an environment where electricity and connectivity is scarce show creativity and resilience.

On the cover of this policy brief you see 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

Picture 1: back of Tesfay

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

Picture 2: hoisting water from the well

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 in the camp. These minors stay in Hitsats for years before they decide to leave, to return or to stay. The minors do not apply for resettlement procedures other than family-reunification.

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.

Eritreans and migrants from Ethiopia and Sudan encounter with many dangers on their routes, which start already in Eritrea itself. Abduction, detention, torture, including (sexual) violence, communicated by ICTs during extortion for ransom. Other dangers the refugees encounter during their journeys include:

- Payments demanded resulting from irregular status of migrants/refugees
- Destruction of ID cards
- Disappearance/drowning
- Police campaigns (giffas) in urban areas
- Persecution through intelligence services
- Collusion between different agencies/government authorities in Sudan
- Lack of responsiveness for protection by authorities
- Refoulement

In the refugee camps, 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

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 dialling 112, the emergency number – the camp residents had to dial 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.

Implications for policy: urgent need for protection to enhance security

- 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
- Enhance the access to basic needs in the camps: water, food, fuel
- Establish channels of trust used by minors and youth in low connectivity areas and build up interactive channels of communication
- Strengthen education and livelihood support in the camps
- 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 messages are heard and processed
- Ensure credibility of information on support and avoid contradictions (instruction to 'stay' combined by repression and impunity)

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