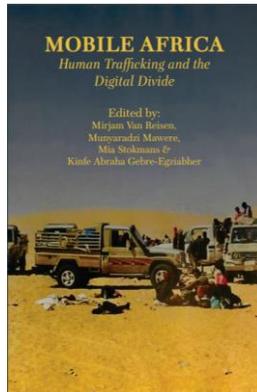


# Journeys of Youth in Digital Africa: Pulled by Connectivity

*Rick Schoenmaeckers*

## Chapter in: Mobile Africa: Human Trafficking and the Digital Divide

From the book Series:  
Connected and Mobile: Migration and Human Trafficking in  
Africa



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# Journeys of Youth in Digital Africa: Pulled by Connectivity

*Rick Schoenmaeckers*

### Introduction

Why, and how, do refugee children and youth leave Eritrea on their own and arrive in a refugee camp? This chapter presents the results of research conducted among unaccompanied children and youth in a refugee camp in northern Ethiopia. The data is based on a three-month period of fieldwork in Hitsats Eritrean Refugee Camp in Tigray province. During this period, the researcher lived in the refugee camp and followed the daily routines and habits of the residents. The data collected was analysed in the

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*With limited access to the Internet and mobile phones, young people in Eritrea are living in a 'black hole' of digital connectivity. This, together with other factors (fear of recruitment into National Service, lack of educational opportunities and social fragmentation), explains why youth are drawn to migration, despite the serious risks involved. As they flee the country, they prioritise getting connected. Adapting to the low connectivity context in refugee camps, their interest in digital connectivity leads to creative digital innovation.*

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context of a world that is becoming more and more digitalised. The research zoomed in on the use of mobile phones by unaccompanied refugee children and youth in their migratory trajectories.

Nowadays, the possession of a mobile phone is no longer a luxury. In many places, it is essential equipment, even for the poorest. Technological devices such as mobile phones are important tools for refugees during their migratory trajectory. Mobile phones and the

Internet are important means of staying connected with others and staying informed about developments that might have an effect on people and their movement. Leung (2010) describes technology as key to the emotional wellbeing of refugees, as it allows them to maintain contact with family members in situations of conflict, displacement, or resettlement. During migration trajectories, technology enables migrants to develop and consolidate social relationships and gives them a sense of security (Harney, 2013). The possession of a mobile phone is also becoming a common and important tool for Eritrean refugee children and youth (Schoenmaeckers, 2018; see also Chapter 4, *Tortured on Camera: The Use of ICTs in Trafficking for Ransom*, by Amber Van Esseveld). These findings seem incompatible with the fact that although the availability of connectivity and Internet connections is increasing across the continent, only a limited part of Africa is fully connected (Porter, 2012).

Children and youth arrive every day in Hitsats, without the accompaniment of parents or guardians. They cross the Eritrean border into Ethiopia, where they arrive into a new world full of challenges and difficulties. The province in northern Ethiopia that borders Eritrea is called Tigray. In 2018, the population of Eritrean under-aged refugee children in Tigray was 10,533, out of a total of 72,772 Eritrean refugees in the province. The majority of Eritreans who leave their country and arrive in Tigray are young men. In 2018, a total of 29,373 were men under the age of 24 (UNHCR, 2018). These refugees are mainly fleeing Eritrea to avoid indefinite National Service, in which all adult men and women have to serve. While women who have children are exempt from National Service, this is not the case for men. Children grow up in families in which their father is often missing, as the military camps or places where National Service is executed are often in faraway places. National service creates fragmented families, which drives young children out of the country, causing a dramatic exodus of unaccompanied minors from Eritrea (Van Reisen & Al-Qasim, 2017; see also Chapter 5, *Sons of Isaias': Slavery and Indefinite National Service in Eritrea*, by Mirjam Van Reisen, Makeda Saba & Klara Smits). Additionally, the Eritrean

authorities have specifically targeted youth to encourage or force them to leave the country since 2001, when a crackdown took place including student arrests and mass detentions (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017).

Most children and youth in this research come from towns and villages near the Eritrean-Ethiopian border. Here, as in most of Eritrea, information and communication technology (ICT) is largely absent and the use of technological devices limited (Centre for Human Rights & University for Peace, 2015). These areas form so-called ‘black holes’ in digital Africa, where technological limitations mean that people are partly unconnected to the rest of the world. Bigger towns and cities are better connected and attract people from places that are less connected. Technological hubs and economic centres can be found in important and big cities. Such cities attract people from everywhere and are densely populated. In order to negotiate a way out of a black hole, facilitators are required, to find out what the situation is outside and to communicate. If you are from a black hole, usually the only way to connect with a connected place is face-to-face (Chapter 1, *Black Holes in the Global Digital Landscape: The Fuelling of Human Trafficking on the African Continent*, by Mirjam Van Reisen, Munyaradzi Mawere, Mia Stokmans, Primrose Nakazibwe, Gertjan Van Stam & Antony Otieno Ong’ayo).

This chapter looks at the extent to which children and youth are sensitive to technological developments in ICTs and attracted to technological (better equipped) hubs.

## **Black holes**

Interactions in Western knowledge societies contribute to explanations of digital exclusion on the African continent. According to Van Reisen *et al.* (Chapter 1, *Black Holes in the Global Digital Landscape*), “the architecture of the digital knowledge society is constructed on, and a reiteration of, the network of sea-routes and nodes that supported information gathering and examination as a basis of which colonial exploitation and imperial economies were

constructed”. From this perspective, the authors state that the direction of the knowledge society is in favour of former colonial powers – and not directed to, or benefiting, excluded areas. Contemporary worldwide digital networks are informed by and constructed using these networks, which ensures the imbalanced distribution of data and information in, and about, the African continent, to the benefit of knowledge produced in Western centres, largely ignoring African cultures and habits – and certainly diminishing African voices in the production of knowledge.

In the contemporary Western world, knowledge societies are seen as societies that have a strong link to the accumulation and expansion of ICT, technological development and knowledge. A feature of imperialistic, colonial and Orientalist thinking is the belief that the Western world is the producer of real knowledge (Chapter 1, *Black Holes in the Global Digital Landscape*, by Van Reisen *et al.*), although, if you analyse knowledge from a broader perspective, it encompasses much more than that. Mawere and Van Stam (2017) claim that in the African context, knowledge can also exist in the embodied form, as knowledge that communities interact with and talk about. Buskens and Van Reisen (2017) argue that understanding epistemological sovereignty is required to study the social processes that ICTs generate in a specific place. Epistemological sovereignty means that all human beings have their own agentic ability to interpret their world within their own context and act upon that understanding.

In Chapter 1, Van Reisen *et al.* identify spaces in Africa where communities reside that are unconnected, or connected in a limited way, to digital information networks. Such spaces are called ‘black holes’. Black hole communities are communities that are unconnected to the global digital architecture because of their geographic location. People who live in such areas can be seen as subjects from which information can only be extracted (not shared) and which are subject to foreign interventions and specific social interactions in which facilitators or gatekeepers have power over the information that flows between the connected and unconnected places. Essentially, these spaces are vulnerable areas, due to lack of

unfiltered information within the overpowering digital world. In these spaces, access to (digital) information enhances power and prestige.

Many Eritrean journalists have been driven into exile. They have set up networks in which news and information from and about Eritrea is widely spread. This has resulted in suppression by the Eritrean government and led to the blocking of several diaspora radio stations from airing in Eritrea. The Government of Eritrea carefully analyses diaspora information and news in general, and filters everything it deems inappropriate (Centre for Human Rights & University for Peace, 2015). Nevertheless, modern technological devices make it easy to stay in contact with each other – but only outside Eritrea. Inside Eritrea technology and connections are weak and ICT is limited, which makes interacting by mobile phone or over the Internet more complicated.

Nodes and connecting points where information and technology is available attract youth from black hole communities seeking to increase their ability to access information from the digital world directly (as opposed to indirectly through facilitators or gatekeepers). It is also the case that many people on the African continent (and elsewhere in the world) are forced out of their homes for political, environmental or economic reasons. Information nodes appear to be destinations for people, as they can benefit from the information and technology that is available in these places. This includes important information about routes for further migratory trajectories, as well as the possibility of contacting relatives elsewhere (Chapter 1, *Black Holes in the Global Digital Landscape*, by Van Reisen *et al.*). Certain tendencies can also be recognised in, for example, worldwide urbanisation patterns from rural areas to cities. Although urban mass-migration has been evident throughout history and mainly motivated by economic reasons (Bahns, 2005), the appearance of, and migration to, technological nodes and hubs is relative and not fixed. Moreover, the magnitude of such nodes and hubs can differ widely; for some it might be a mega-city and for others it can be a refugee camp with limited connectivity.

Due to enhanced technology, information about the world is more easily spread and accessible than ever before. Even in small, unconnected villages, knowledge about possibilities elsewhere are communicated. When youngsters arrive in Ethiopia or elsewhere outside Eritrea, it becomes easier for them to access such (digital) information, which might be a trigger for them to move on, as they hear stories of better opportunities elsewhere. However, attraction to technology is not the only reason for people to leave black holes. People are also sensitive to others' behaviour. Hence, the attraction to information nodes should be analysed in the context of social conformation and what is known as 'nudging'.

## **Nudging**

People are social animals and highly sensitive to the behaviour of others. Conforming to others makes people feel confident and accepted by a community or reference group. This is explained and analysed by Sunstein and Thaler (2008), who talk about 'nudging' and how it creates herd behaviour and can bring people to make certain decisions. The word 'nudging' refers to poking or pushing someone gently in a certain direction. People are strongly influenced by the deeds and statements of others. This is an automatic reaction to avoid the things that you do being received as socially unaccepted. This reaction is strongly linked to social learning. Learning from others is the basis for individual and social development. Even small social 'nudges' can lead to massive social changes in societies. Two basic categories of social influence are information and peer pressure. Other people's actions and thoughts convey information about what might be best for us – and we conform to other people's behaviour, values and attitudes in order to avoid disapproval.

Nudging, herd behaviour and peer pressure in the situation of Eritrean children and youth was brought forward by the journalist Westerhoff (2019). She interviewed two boys who left Eritrea at the age of 12. One boy said: "All our friends have left, there is no one there anymore. Who are we going to play with or spend time with? So we decided to leave too". The other boy added: "Every day, I had

friends calling me and asking me: what the hell are you doing? When do you come to Ethiopia? So we came” (translation by author). Every day children are leaving Eritrea alone or with friends. Some leave for the first time and others had already left and returned before, arriving in Ethiopia for the second or third time. They arrive in Ethiopia hoping for a better life and better opportunities (Schoenmaeckers, 2018; Westerhoff, 2019; Gebreyesus & Schoenmaeckers, 2019).

## Methodology

The overarching question in this research is: *To what extent can the concept of a black hole explain why children and youth leave their hometowns in Eritrea without the company of their parents or caregivers, with a focus on ‘nudging’?* This question is answered by a literature review on black hole theory and on the situation in Eritrea. The empirical data gathered during this research is used to respond to this question. By examining the following sub questions, the theoretical lacuna is narrowed:

- *What forces unaccompanied children and youth to leave their hometowns?*
- *What role do mobile phones play in the trajectories of unaccompanied children and youth?*
- *How do communication and (digital) information influence unaccompanied minors and youths’ decisions to leaving their hometowns?*

The research includes a literature review and qualitative ethnographic research. The data includes transcripts of in-depth interviews, observations, surveys, focus group discussions and workshops. The respondents in this research (12–23 years old) were approached with the support of the Ethiopian Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). Access to the refugee camp was granted after ARRA gave clearance for the research. The NRC takes care of the unaccompanied minors in refugee camps in Ethiopia and is responsible for the implementation of several education and livelihood programmes, which were visited and studied during the fieldwork. Therefore,

clearance was also needed from the NRC and the details of the study were thoroughly discussed.

In consideration of the ethical issues, all methods and techniques were discussed with the respondents themselves and the legal guardians of the (youngest) respondents to ensure informed consent. By doing so, the autonomy and safety of all children and youth who participated in the research was ensured and fully respected (Bryman, 2012; Ellis, Kia-Keating, Yusuf, Lincoln & Nur, 2007). The term 'children' in this research is used for all respondents younger than 18-years (UNICEF, 1989). The term 'youth' is used for all people between 18 and 23 years (adapted from State Adolescent Health Resource Center, 2013).

The first respondents were introduced by the case-manager of the NRC. After this first interview, children and youth were randomly approached and introduced by other respondents creating a snowball effect. In order to obtain a clear overview of the situation, 32 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with children and youth between 12 and 23 years old. Half of the respondents were female and half male. The focus group discussions and workshops were held with the same respondents as the interviews, because of the relationship of trust and confidence established during the interview sessions. All in-depth interviews started with questions on demographic issues and the possession and use of mobile phones. The interviews and focus group discussions were held in the shelters of the respondents or in the children-areas of the refugee camp. The research was conducted with the help of interpreters who were residents of the camp themselves. This created a more equal situation and engendered trust among the participants. In further consideration of ethical issues, the interpreters received training and were informed in detail about the purpose and practices of the study.

The data was collected between June 2017 and August 2017. During the time inside the refugee camp, crucial observations were made about the programmes of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and NGOs. Such programmes included ration

days, in which food is distributed among the refugees, and education and professional skill-training programmes, which are offered by the different NGOs. Beside these formal activities, many informal activities were attended with the residents of Hitsats, ranging from birthday and graduation parties to football games or food and coffee ceremonies. At the end of the data-collection period, all respondents were invited to attend a certificate-of-participation celebration.

### **Eritrea: Understanding children and youth**

The Eritrean government started a systematic campaign against its own people after the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which ended in 2000. After this war, the government implemented a policy of mandatory National Service. Although National Service is theoretically 18 months, in practice it is indefinite (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017; Kibreab, 2014). According to Kibreab, the Eritrean government introduced National Service “as a means of transmitting the social capital produced during the war, and maintaining the high level of vigilance and sense of insecurity – the siege mentality – that characterised the war” (2009, p. 42). This tactic was used by the government to create a national identity and to avert perceived threats. Before entering National Service, Eritrean citizens attend one year at Sawa Military Training Camp. This training was introduced in 2003 and is mandatory for all grade 12 students before they are redirected to National Service or one of the nine colleges. These colleges appeared after the closure of Asmara University in 2007 and only the very best students can attend. As soon as students finish one of the nine colleges, they can only officially graduate upon completion of National Service. The result is that students practically never graduate (European Asylum Support Office, 2015).

Mekonnen and Van Reisen (2012) have outlined that under-aged children are forcefully recruited to National Service as well. They based their findings on a leaked report from Eritrea’s Office of the State President in February 2009. According to this report, a total of 3,510 under-aged children had enlisted for military training in Eritrea (Chapter 5, *Sons of Isaias*, by Van Reisen, *et al.*). Van Reisen and Al-

Qasim (2017) point out that conscription to National Service and the dire human rights situation in Eritrea make even the youngest children want to leave.

Oppression, the violation of human rights and fear has pushed many out of the country. The Eritrean diaspora is vast and widespread around the world. Eritreans maintain strong and interconnected ties with each other through which information, money, values and tastes are exchanged. These are powerful networks through which hopes, aspirations, expectations and goals are shared (Kibreab, 2007; Hepner, 2015).

### **Technology and connectivity in Eritrea**

Eritrea has one state-owned telecom provider, called EriTel. This network covers 85% of the country, but has low mobile and Internet penetration. The average mobile penetration rate of African countries is 46%, but in Eritrea it is only 7%. Furthermore, Eritrea has only 1% Internet penetration. This low Internet penetration rate is mainly attributed to the lack of 3G and 4G mobile broadband networks (Mutafungwa *et al.*, 2017). This low rate means that the flow of information that goes via the Internet is not perceived as a serious threat to the government's monopoly on information, resulting in no laws that address Internet use in Eritrea (Centre for Human Rights & University for Peace, 2015).

As such, mobile services in Eritrea are basic and in most parts of the country rely on phone calls and text messages. Additionally, it is complicated to obtain a sim-card, as clearance from the local authorities is needed. Technically, one must complete National Service in order to obtain a sim-card; however, most youth obtain mobile phone access through friends and relatives. The Internet is mainly available in the urban centres, in, for example, Internet cafes. WiFi can be accessed from cyber cafes where people usually go to

access Facebook and other social media in order to contact friends and family (Saba<sup>1</sup>, personal communication, email, 4 March 2019).

Most children and youth from remote areas in Eritrea do not have a mobile phone. If children and youth have a phone, they use it mainly to share photographs with each other and to listen to music or the radio. For a small amount of money, they can buy songs in shops in the small villages. The way people share photos or songs with each other is via share applications – such as Share.It, C-Share, All Share and Xender – which convert the phones in mobile hotspots so that they can connect with other phones. When connected to other phones, as well as images and music, applications and other files can also be shared freely without the use of the Internet. This method of sharing applications or documents through phones is also used in Hitsats camp (Schoenmaeckers, 2018).

## **Upon arrival in Ethiopia: Hitsats camp**

### ***The conditions in camp***

This researcher found the situation in Hitsats refugee camp to be alarming; there is a lack of almost all basic resources and the environmental circumstances are making life in the camp difficult. In 2018, Hitsats had 20,526 Eritrean refugees (UNHCR, 2018). The camp is located near the city of Shire in a region where temperatures can reach up to 50 degrees Celsius in the dry season. The main issues in Hitsats are shortages of drinking water, food, electricity, and firewood; lack of hygiene facilities; and malaria epidemics, which hits people on a regular base. Additionally, there is a lack of secondary education, which impacts on the large proportion of the children in the camp. Once a day, people can fill jerry cans with water; this is organised per community at fixed times. Furthermore, there is a monthly food distribution programme. One week a month, people can pick up their rations at the World Food Programme distribution point. The rations per person include 10 kg of wheat and 60

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<sup>1</sup> Saba is an active member of the Horn of Africa Civil Society Forum who has lived in Eritrea for years.

Ethiopian birr, which is about EUR 2.50 (Schoenmaeckers, 2018; Gebreyesus & Schoenmaeckers, 2019).

### ***Connectivity and mobile phone use***

In Ethiopia, only 15.3% of the population use the Internet and the country has a penetration of only 4.2%. There is one telecom provider: Ethio Telecom. The country has a restrictive telecom architecture that relies on excessive government control. The sale or resale of telecommunication services on a private basis is forbidden and telecommunication technology that bypasses the local network is also illegal. Although the government announced that it will liberalise the sector, civil society and the private sector are not allowed to be involved in the telecommunication sector. Various international calling applications are forbidden and the government blocks and filters the media and social media platforms to prevent the mobilisation of people. Internet shutdowns have become the norm in recent years. These blocks are accompanied by the violation of human rights, including freedom of information (Zelege, 2019).

As such, connectivity in Hitsats camp is weak. Mobile phone and Internet connections do not reach the refugee camp and ARRA is hesitant about the Internet and social media services. During a visit by the researchers' team to the camp, a conversation with the camp coordinator about the possibility of a Facebook page for camp residents was rejected immediately. The coordinator replied with suspicion in an intimidating voice that if such a Facebook page were introduced by one of the researchers, access to the camp would be denied immediately.

Most of the youngest children in Hitsats did not have a mobile phone, the older ones (15 years and older) did have a phone. People mainly obtained mobile phones from others who had left the camp and gave their phone to them. Occasionally, people bought a phone with money that was sent to them by relatives. The most common brands of phones were Tecno and Huawei. Brands like Samsung or Apple were rare and never seen among children and youth. Even if they had a phone, in many cases they could not afford to put credit on

their phone to communicate or make use of the Internet. Children in the camp used their phones mainly for games, reading the Bible (a free app) and listening to music. The amount of money that was put on the phones was usually small, Ethiopian birr 5–15 (EUR 0.15–0.45). With these small amounts, people could make a local phone call or send a couple of messages via Viber, IMO or Messenger, which were the platforms mainly used by people to communicate. Another difficulty the residents of Hitsats had to deal with was the limited power supply. Electricity was available for only a few hours a day via generators. This resulted in continuously uncharged phone batteries. The small stores and restaurants owned by the Hitsats residents offered the opportunity to charge mobile phones during the hours that electricity was allowed in the camp. If the owners of the stores had generators, they charged people a small amount of money to charge their phones in large multiple sockets (Schoenmaeckers, 2018).

Connectivity and mobile signal strength are low, which makes it difficult to reach online platforms or to communicate through mobile devices. If someone wants to make a phone call, the phones are switched to the 2G network. On this network, phone calls can be made more easily than on the other networks. If someone wants to reach an Internet page, the phones are switched to the 3G network for better connectivity. Text messages are sent and received relatively well on both networks. Only at night, between midnight and 7 am, the signal on the phones could be qualified as good. In order to grasp a weak signal during the day, the people in Hitsats use several tricks. The most common trick used to grasp the signal was by dialling 112 – the emergency number. By dialling this number continuously up to 15 times, a weak signal was established for a short period of time. Another option to get a weak Internet connection was to use the application Psiphon. This application is designed for people in oppressive regimes and ensures a free space to surf the Internet. In Hitsats the application was used because it reinforces the Internet connection and maintains the signal for a short time. Besides these tricks to get a signal, there were certain places in the camp where the connection was stronger. On top of a hill the connection improved, as well as in Hitsats town, which is the town of the host community

that is directly connected to the camp. In order to communicate with family back in Eritrea, the applications Tango and Nymgo were used. These applications establish a phone connection via the United States, which makes phone calls possible. These applications are necessary, as all regular lines between Ethiopia and Eritrea are blocked by the governments of both countries. However, these options were not used often because the US dollar needs to be uploaded on the application, which is not possible for most youngsters (Schoenmaeckers, 2018).

### ***Children and youth in Hitsats and mobile phones***

For many of the children and youth in Hitsats, it was the first time that they had had a mobile phone. In Hitsats the options on the phone expanded, compared to the options in Eritrea, and children and youth started to use more and different programmes on their cell phones. They used the phones mainly to communicate with friends and family inside and outside the camp. If one had Facebook, they could open their Facebook page and scroll through the posts. In the interview with M (16-year-old female) the different ways in which the phone was used emerged:

RS: *Do you have a smartphone?*

M: *Yes.*

RS: *How important is your phone?*

M: *Very important.*

RS: *What do you use your phone for?*

M: *My mother's sister is in Holland, I am communicating with her.*

RS: *So, you stay in touch with your family in Holland. Do you also use your phone to access news or other information?*

M: *Yes.*

RS: *And for entertainment?*

M: *Yes.*

RS: *What kind of entertainment?*

M: *I like to read the Bible on my phone.*

RS: *Do you learn any new skills with your phone? Reading other books or learning new languages?*

M: *No.*

RS: *Do you make calls via normal phone calls, or do you use other applications like Viber, IMO etcetera?*

M: *I am planning to use Facebook soon.*

RS: *And do you make normal phone calls?*

M: *Mainly with my friends here in the community.*

RS: *And normal text messages?*

M: *Yes, I also do that.*

(M., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 6 July 2017)

The way M uses her phone is common among youngsters. Stories about phone use in Hitsats varied from using them for entertainment, like games or applications that tell jokes, through to contacting relatives who live in different parts of the world. The importance of having a mobile phone was further highlighted during the interview with S (21-year-old male). When asked why he would like to have a smart phone, he answered: “For the applications that I can put on the phone, for example, Messenger or Facebook. With such applications I can try to find my family” (S., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 12 July 2017). In this quote, the importance of the phone in the search for missing family members is brought to the fore. As a modern way of finding family members, mobile phones are valuable. Additionally, mobile phones and connecting with people outside Eritrea are important, because relatives elsewhere can send remittances to people in Hitsats. When money is sent, people are notified through their phone and have to bring their phone with them to the bank in order to receive their remittances.

The interviews with M and S highlight the interconnectedness of the diaspora, as all people communicate directly or indirectly with relatives somewhere in the world. The direct communication by mobile phone is mainly between Eritrean people who are outside Eritrea or Eritrean people who are inside Eritrea. When Eritreans residing in Ethiopia want to contact relatives in Eritrea, different indirect communication links are used. Informing relatives in Eritrea about children arriving in Hitsats is done via relatives elsewhere.

Another way in which information streams flows between Ethiopia and Eritrea is between people leaving and returning to Eritrea.

Especially with the youngest children, it was noticed that to inform their families about their arrival in Hitsats, the information went via other children who were returning to Eritrea. F (12-year-old male) explained how his family knew where he was:

RS: *Does your family know that you are here?*

F: *Yes, they know because of the other children that came with me. We left Eritrea together, but they went back to Eritrea already. These children told my family that I am here.*

RS: *Why didn't you go back with them?*

F: *I didn't want to go back to Eritrea.*

RS: *Why did your friends want to go back?*

F: *Because they wanted to see their parents again.*

(F., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 5 July 2017)

The other common method of informing relatives was through relatives elsewhere in the world, which was brought out during the interview with E (14-year-old female) whose father lived in Israel:

RS: *Where is your mother? Is she still in Eritrea?*

E: *Yes, she is in Eritrea.*

RS: *Did she agree with the fact that you left?*

E: *She didn't know anything about that.*

RS: *When did your father leave?*

E: *Ten years ago.*

RS: *How did you stay in contact with your father?*

E: *By his mobile phone. He contacted me with his mobile phone.*

RS: *Did he ask you to go to Israel or did you decided yourself to go to there?*

E: *We never discussed it.*

RS: *Does your mother know that you are here now?*

E: *Yes.*

RS: *How does she know?*

E: *My father called her. But this is very common in my village; if a child is lost for one day, and the other day he is still not coming home, the people already know:*

*'Oh ok, he is going to Ethiopia'. This is the case because it is just one hour walk. But in my case, also my father called my mom.*

(E., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 7 July 2017)

The above indicates that the black hole of connectivity is bridged by personal communication between several individuals who feel bonded with the community in Eritrea, as also found by Van Reisen *et al.* (Chapter 1, *Black Holes in the Global Digital Landscape*). As highlighted in the stories above, the information about the children reaches their parents back in Eritrea and in the diaspora one way or another. It is alarming that E states that it is normal in her village for people to automatically assume that when children are missing they have left for Ethiopia.

### **Social media and secondary movement**

The expansion of social media also has undesirable consequences. As there is a lack of awareness raising about the content of platforms like Facebook, as well as ignorance and unfamiliarity, the content on these platforms is perceived as reality. During an interview with W (18-year-old female) the unawareness about the nature of information spread by Facebook was underscored:

RS: [...] *and how do you access news and information?*

W: *From Facebook, there I can access any news, and anything else I want to know.*

[...]

RS: *Do you use your phone to learn new skills? Language or something else?*

W: *Yes.*

RS: *What kind of skills?*

W: *I see... on Facebook for example... I see new things, and then I can answer the questions that people ask.*

RS: *Questions? What kind of questions?*

W: *Any questions. I can give comments [on Facebook] to everything.*

(W., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 11 July 2017)

Social media starts to play a more important role for children and youth, because on these platforms they are exposed to images of life abroad. This exposure, together with direct and indirect stimulation via phone calls or other messaging from relatives in Europe or elsewhere, make people want to leave for Europe.

The organisations that are active in the camp (various NGOs, ARRA and UNHCR) are familiar with this trend and they have launched several campaigns in which the dangers of secondary migration are highlighted in an attempt to stop the outflow of young migrants. One of these campaigns is the ‘Telling the Real Story’ campaign. Billboards and pamphlets promoting the messages of this campaign were found in many places in and around the refugee camp. The campaign is a community-based platform that disseminates stories about the extraordinary journeys made by Eritrean and Somali refugees seeking asylum in Europe (UNHCR, n.d.).



*Figure 6.1. Billboard of Telling the Real Story campaign in Tigray*  
Photograph: Rick Schoenmaeckers

When children were asked if they knew what the posters and pamphlets meant, different stories emerged. Some stories were related to the actual meaning of the campaign, others had little to do with it, or children simply did not know what the campaign meant.

Nevertheless, most children and youth in Hitsats are familiar with the dangers of the onward migration trajectories. Many have lost friends or family members due to migration. Additionally, a Hitsats Facebook page (Facebook, n.d.) on which, originally, news about Eritreans on the move and in Europe was published, has evolved into a page where people are warned and awareness is created about the dangers abroad and the humiliating and violent practices taking place in Libya and elsewhere on the migration routes.

These stories about the dangerous journeys resulted in most of the youngsters in this research preferring not to travel by themselves or with groups to Europe. They stated that they want to go via a legal route or via resettlement by the UNHCR. Nevertheless, when the decision to leave for Europe is made by children and youth, as well as by adults and older residents of Hitsats, there appears to be no risk that will stop them from going.

When people continue their journey, it seems that helpful applications on mobile phones during their migration trajectories are most of the time useless because connectivity is lacking and mobile phone functions that might help them are unknown. Web-mapping applications such as Google Maps were new to most people when these were demonstrated by the researcher. The functionality of such applications is also limited by lack of connectivity and the fact that demographic applications use lots of data, which is too expensive for most people.

Thus, as soon as cities are reached where connectivity and mobile phone strength is more functional, contact can be made with relatives and mobile functions used again. The downside of these mobile devices during migratory trajectories is their abuse by criminal organisations that target vulnerable refugees with few or no assets, especially along the route taken by most Eritreans. Kidane and Van Reisen (2017) have outlined how information about and from relatives abroad and extortion through mobile phones severely damages Eritrean people back home and in the diaspora. Young refugees are captured along their trajectories to Europe and tortured,

raped and killed, while their family members are extorted for ransom using mobile phones. This modus operandi of the human traffickers is not only highly traumatising for the victims of the torture, but also for the relatives involved, leading to secondary trauma among relatives of the victims, and contributing to collective trauma in Eritrean society as a whole. This collective trauma evolves and is aggravated by the detailed information about these practices that is spread among the diaspora via social media (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017; see also Chapter 4, *Tortured on Camera*, by Amber Van Esseveld).

### **Reasons for leaving: Is it only (digital) information?**

During the research it emerged that mobile phones play an important role for children and youth from Eritrea. Whereas, for many, the phones were useless due to lack of connectivity, data, money and the functionality of the phone itself, they all wanted to have one and stated that it was important. Clearly, (digital) information is not the only reason for children and youth to leave Eritrea. The data in this research showed that peer pressure and herd behaviour were contributing reasons for children and youth to leave Eritrea.

During the interviews, the respondents highlighted that “all their friends had left Eritrea”, or were about to leave, and had persuaded them to join and to come with them. Most of the time, leaving was unplanned and unorganised. A clear example of this came forward during the interview with M (13-year-old female):

RS: [...] *and why did you leave Eritrea?*

M: *I had no plan to come here. I was going to collect fruit [...] while I was busy collecting them my friend took me by the arm, and together we crossed the border. I didn't have any plan...*

(M., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 6 July 2017)

Such answers were not unique, especially among the younger children (under 15-years old). They reported their reason for leaving as mainly to do with friends who had left and in order to earn money that they could send back home when arriving in Europe. The youth who were

older than 18 years had other reasons for leaving Eritrea. Most said that they left Eritrea to avoid Sawa military training or National Service. The main goal of these youngsters was to travel to Europe in order to work and send money back to their families in Eritrea. However, there were still older respondents who also left because friends persuaded them to leave. During the interview with N (18-year-old male), for example, this was clearly explained:

RS: [...] *were you happy in Eritrea?*

N: *Yes.*

RS: *Why did you leave?*

N: [*laughing*] ... *because my friend told me to go to Europe.*

RS: *Is there anything you miss in Eritrea?*

N: *No.*

RS: *Do you like Hitsats more than Eritrea?*

N: *No, I like Eritrea more.*

RS: *Are you planning to move to another place?*

N: *I want to go to Europe.*

(N., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 11 July 2017)

Other respondents mentioned other reasons for coming to Hitsats. Some left because of the educational opportunities that were available in the camp. These opportunities include mainly vocational education and training (VET) programmes, which are offered by NRC and Zuid Oost Azië (ZOA). The courses offered include tailoring, carpentering, metal work, electrician, beautician, computer skills, and cooking courses. This was the case with S (21-year-old male):

RS: *Do you have a plan for any future travels?*

S: *I don't have any plan.*

RS: *Did you only plan to come to Ethiopia and from here you will see?*

S: *I want to live here, because I want to complete my education.*

RS: *So you want to live in Ethiopia?*

S: *I want to complete my education here.*

[...]

S: *I am learning at the YEP [Youth Education Pack].*

RS: *Because there is no 9<sup>th</sup> grade right?*

S: *No, so I am learning tailoring.*

RS: *Are you planning to do the 9<sup>th</sup> grade as well?*

S: *I would like to do that, I want to learn, but there is no 9<sup>th</sup> grade. So, I learn at the YEP. When I finish my tailoring course, I will take the other courses at the YEP as well.*

(S., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 12 July 2017)

The Youth Education Pack (YEP) is the name of the vocational educational programme offered by the NRC. The programme is very popular in the camp. All residents in the camp had positive reactions to the different courses and said that certain courses in Eritrea were not available or very expensive. Such educational courses, as well as formal education are important in emergency situations. In situations where people have suffered war, oppression or other traumatising events, education can reduce existing inequalities, it can assist with psychosocial recovery and the readjustment of values and social skills, and restore hope and normalcy (Lopes Cardozo & Shah, 2016). Whereas the courses are popular and the intentions of the NGOs providing them good, there seemed to be a misunderstanding about the purpose of the courses. The courses create the illusion that after graduating the students are prepared for a life in Europe or the United States of America. In a focus group with youth aged between 18 and 20 years old, this was emphasised by one of the participants:

Participant: *I am graduated here [VET programme] as a cook, so I will work as a cook there [in Europe].*

RS: *But what if they don't need a cook?*

Participant: *If there is no work as a cook I will do anything else they have for me; like carrying things from one place to another.*

RS: *[...] how will you get money to learn the language?*

Participant: *First I will work with my graduate certificate.*

RS: *But how will you work there without knowing the language?*

Participant: *First I must learn the language. If not, I need an interpreter who has to live together with me.*

RS: *Who will pay for an interpreter?*

Participant: *All countries have agreed together that they will pay for an interpreter [for refugees].*

(Focus group discussion, Schoenmaeckers with 4 respondents, face-to-face, Hitsats, 2 August 2017)

During this focus group discussion, it was highlighted that the expectations the youth had regarding their certificates were high and unrealistic, as the three to six months courses do not provide the participants with full theoretical knowledge about the subject, nor with a legal certification with which they can apply for a job abroad. Additionally, the response of one of the participants to the question ‘what he will do if they don’t need a cook’ highlights the limited knowledge of refugees about employment possibilities abroad. This limited knowledge was prevalent among all children. In the interview with M (13-year-old female) this was also clear:

RS: *[...] and what kind of job would you like to have?*

M: *I don’t know... do you have a manual? [...] what kind of work is there available in the United States?*

*[job examples are given...]*

M: *I would like to be a doctor.*

(M., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 6 July 2017)

The ignorance and innocence of the girl is recognisable in her answers. At the same time, it is alarming and highlights the unawareness of the young children who are crossing the border on their own. Especially the younger children appeared not to be fleeing any danger, but had “just left with their friends”. This easiness about leaving among the younger children raised questions about their family situations back in Eritrea. Whenever asked about thoughts of families and relatives regarding their leaving, it emerged that almost nobody had told their parents about their intention to travel to Ethiopia. All of the children claimed that if they had told an adult, they would have never let them go. Additionally, the fathers of most children are far from home in the military, which leaves only the mother as guardian at the home. Most of the children said that they missed their mothers and siblings, but there was no thinking of

returning to Eritrea. The focus was on Europe and it seemed that there was nothing that could change this mindset.

Detailed information on how the children would get to Europe was missing, but roughly everybody knew the route. F (16-year-old female) shared what she knew about getting to Europe:

RS: *Do you have any idea about how to go to Europe?*

F: *Yes, I know. You have to go to Sudan, then Libya, and then the Mediterranean.*

RS: *Ok. And is this what you want to do?*

F: *No, I only know how I have to go.*

(F., interview with Schoenmaeckers, face-to-face, Hitsats, 6 July 2017)

The route described by F shows her ignorance and unawareness about what might happen on the journey. Other children gave similar responses, which is concerning.

## **Conclusion**

Technology, particularly mobile phones, is important for most Eritrean children and youth who have fled their country. They use mobile phones to communicate with each other and with relatives elsewhere and mobile phones are an important source of information and entertainment. It can be said that children and youth are enjoying the technological possibilities in the new environment – Hitsats.

Back in Eritrea, the only way for many of the children and youth to receive information and to get in contact with places outside Eritrea was via direct interaction with others. All children and youth in this research had lived in small border villages in Eritrea. They receive information from people leaving and returning to the villages who bring stories from abroad. Such stories included aspects of the life in Ethiopian refugee camps and, for example, the educational opportunities that are available in these camps. Other stories and information were received from people who have relatives elsewhere and got in contact with them via mobile phones. Such stories trigger

mobility among the children and youth, encouraging them to leave for Ethiopia.

Upon arrival in Ethiopia, most children and youth want to have a mobile phone, even if these phones have limited or no functionality, partly due to the limited connectivity. Creative tricks are used to make use of the limited connectivity in the camp, making it possible to contact people outside the camp and to use the Internet. When people leave black hole societies in Eritrea, it seems that they become more attracted and attached to mobile phones and more eager to arrive in Europe or the United States of America.

In relation to their reason for leaving, this research found that children and youth are leaving due to fear of recruitment into National Service, for educational opportunities outside Eritrea, and because of herd behaviour; as many left the country, social fragmentation led the children to follow parents, siblings or friends. Most of the children and youth in Hitsats said that they left Eritrea because their friends had already left or because of stories they had heard about life outside Eritrea.

The theory of nudging, by Sunstein and Thaler (2008) sheds light on how people are influenced by other people. The concept of a black hole partly explains why children and youth are heading to Ethiopia, and Hitsats in particular, for digital connectivity. More extensive research needs to be conducted in order to elaborate on the concept of a black hole and herd behaviour, and how this can lead even young children to make drastic and dangerous life decisions.

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