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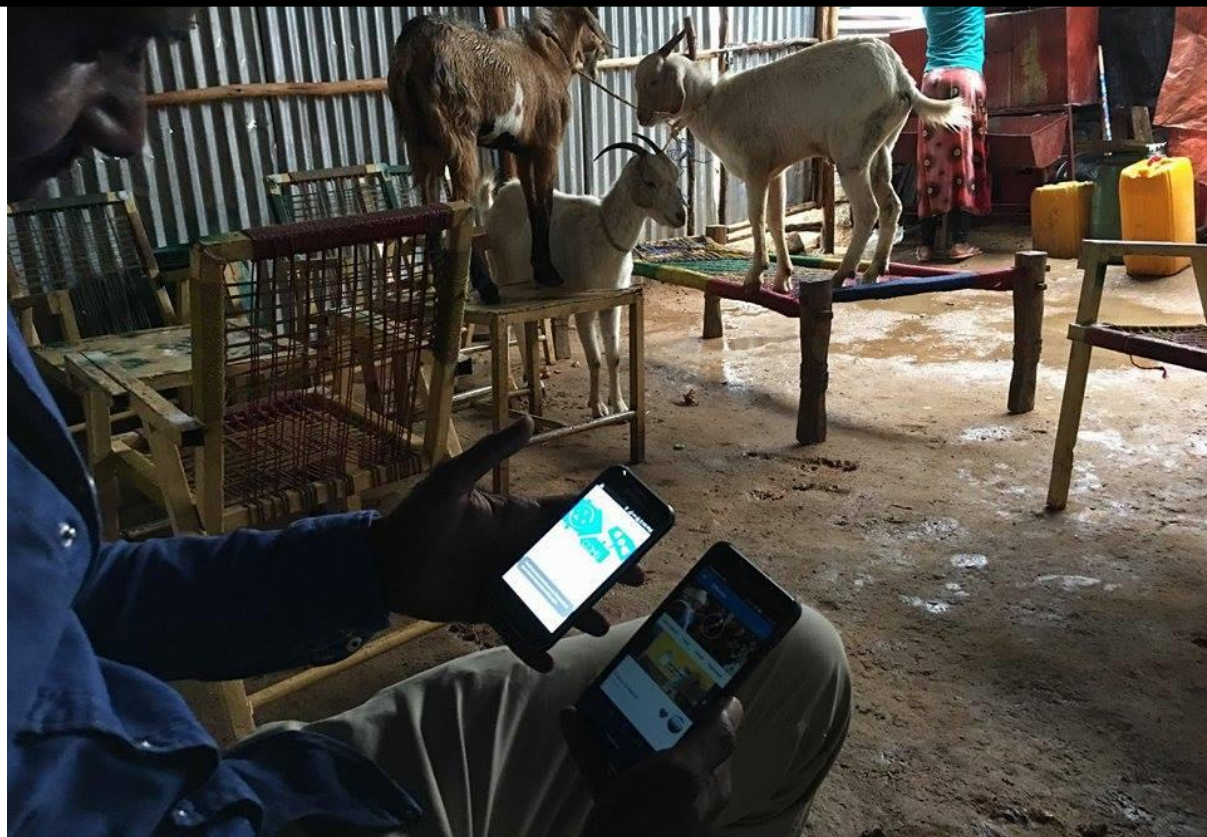
POLICY BRIEF No. 2

Relevance of Communication in the Fight Against Human Trafficking

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

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Summary

The plight of refugees seeking to reach Europe escaping war and political conflict is something that continues to prove a challenge. The need to develop better policies and strategies and design better support interventions is imperative; however this can't be achieved without having a comprehensive understanding of the refugee experiences of trauma and collective trauma. This paper argues that trauma support delivered, utilising the refugees' own communication pathways, is key to successful integration of refugees reducing the risk of dangerous secondary migration.

Introduction

Migration of refugees and particularly the route across sub-Saharan Africa through the Mediterranean into Europe has become a modern day tragedy that either content can afford. At its peak, in 2015, the number of refugees entering Europe was just over a million and 33% of those were from sub-Saharan Africa and that year it was estimated 3,771 people drowned while crossing the Mediterranean[1]. In recognition of the magnitude of the danger and rising number of people at risk, various strategies have been developed to mitigate identified risks and provide a humanitarian response. For instance UNHCR's strategy focuses on interventions that include raising awareness of risks and improving communication with communities likely to travel to Libya[2].

For its part the European Union is implementing a range of policies that aim to precariously balance deterring and controlling irregular migration and protection of refugees and human life[3].

However despite overall numbers of migration to Europe going down, according the European coastguard agency-Frontex's 2018 risk analysis, the Central Mediterranean Route,

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[1] Byrne, S. (2018) The push and pull factors behind migration to Europe RTE (updated 6, Feb 2018)
[2] UNHCR (2017) Central Mediterranean Route: Working on the Alternatives to Dangerous Jounreys. Supplimentary Appeal January 2027 – December 2017
[3] European Commission, "Global Approach to Migration and Mobility", retrieved on 8 November 2017

continues to be the most active path for illegal crossing into Europe and one of the most dangerous for migrants[4].

The danger at sea is neither the only, nor necessarily the biggest risk to refuges either. The desert route is also riddled, by intricate myriads of trafficking networks and terrorist groups intent on capitalising from the desperation of refugees. In 2015 ISIL, beheaded and shot 30 Ethiopians and Eritreans and released a video showing the whole event that took place in two different locations.

But neither the awareness of the dangers nor the deterrent from official policy seems to result in enough refugees deciding against embarking on this calamitous journey risking their lives and often that of their young children. The question often asked and seldom answered, satisfactorily is: Why do refugees who are intent on seeking protection, put themselves in so much danger and end up loosing their very lives in the pursuit of saving it?

The simple answer to that question often heavily relies on the push and pull theory of miration that would state that: this migration crisis is determined by the simple fact that political and socio-economic crisis in sub-Saharan Africa is pushing many people to risk their lives to reach Europe. On the other hand, the provision for asylum support is said to be the pull factor perfectly balancing that equation. This scenario continues to inform migration policies and often results in strategies focused on mitigating the economic incentives that are assumed to be on the pull side of the equation.

However, this narrative neglects an analysis of the traumatic total devastation that is a reality of modern day war and political conflicts. Political violence and armed conflicts, whether targeted at an individual or towards the population at large constitute an immense and traumatic threat. Most people exposed to trauma will experience stress responses such as avoidance, sleep disturbances, hyper-arousal and hyper-vigilance, adaptive reactions that prepare the survivor to deal with on-going risks. These psychological symptoms damage the victim's self esteem as well as their trust in fellow human beings affecting whole

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[4] Frontex (2018) 2018 Risk Analysis. February 2018 Risk Analysis Unit Frontex reference number: 2671 /2018 Warsaw

communities in a situation of collective trauma. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimate that, in the situations of armed conflicts throughout the world, 10% of the people who experience traumatic events will have serious mental health problems and another 10% will develop behaviour that will hinder their ability to function effectively[5].

One of the impacts of trauma is diminishing the cognitive capacity of victims, curtailing their ability to adequately recognize and evaluate probabilities and consequences of alternatives presented to them, the very capacities required to make good decisions over important matters. We also know that when the ability to process robust information is hampered human beings relay on feelings that come to substitute substantive information. This is crucial to understand as it means traumatised, destitute refugees are making crucial decisions regarding secondary migration relaying on emotional information about their options, rather than the awareness raising information provided by official channels.

In addition to relaying on their own feelings we also know that refugees relay on each other for information regarding these decisions, this compounds the problems as, not only are individuals basing their information on their traumatic reactions but they are also accessing information from fellow refugees who are more likely to be as traumatised creating a trauma riddled information loop, that is easily accessible on smartphones and social media, that is more likely to result in bad decisions and the disregard of factual information from official sources.

Researching the delivery of context specific trauma support to refugees on the move

The research we carried out addresses trauma using a Self Help Low Cost Post Traumatic Stress Program (SHLCPTS) that raised the awareness of refugees about the prevalence and impact of traumatic stress on the individual and their community and then enabled them to gain skills for coping with individual and collective trauma.[6]

To make up for the lack of qualified and trained human resource in refugee camps and along the migratory routes and given that smartphones and social media is a medium familiar and

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[5] World Health Organization. World health report 2001 – Mental health: new under- standing, new hope. Geneva: Switzerland, 2001.
[6] Kidane, S., Stokmans, M. (2018) ICT-based Psycho-Social Trauma Relief in Refugee Camps in Ethiopia. Tilburg University

trusted by refugees we used this technology to deliver SHLCPTS on an App that was downloaded to their smartphones.

We found a consistent positive result of the intervention impacting on reducing trauma levels, and enhancing social and economic resilience (perceptions of income, capability and empowerment) of refugees. Given that the situation of refugees had not actually changed during the duration of the research, all improvements are in fact improvements in perception resulting from the reduction in levels of traumatic stress. This indicates that short and low cost intervention such as SHILPTS is well placed to complement and enhance the impact of support and protection offered to refugees and is more likely able to reduce the tendency to embark on dangerous secondary migration than the current approach that doesn't take the impact of trauma and collective trauma in the development of awareness raising and support or deterrent strategies adopted to address the refugee crisis.

Policy implications

The situation of tens of thousands of refugees across refugee camps in sub-Saharan Africa and the continuous risk of human trafficking is something that requires a comprehensive engagement of all stakeholders to address. Backstop solutions that don't address the depth and breadth of the challenges faced by refugees and those providing support and protection to them will inevitably incubate problems rather than solve them. It is therefore important to provide a policy context that enables the addressing of the consequences of the refugee experience and the implications for the quality of the decisions they make regarding their safety and prospects.

Trauma and collective trauma are crucial elements of the refugee experience and a challenge that should be overcome by those seeking to address the care and protection of refugees. ICT has been proven to be a potentially positive tool for delivering crucial trauma support that facilitates better integration of refugees without resorting to risky secondary migration.

Research by: *Kidane, S., Stokmans, M.*

Policy brief compiled by: *Kidane, S.*

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